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NO. 163

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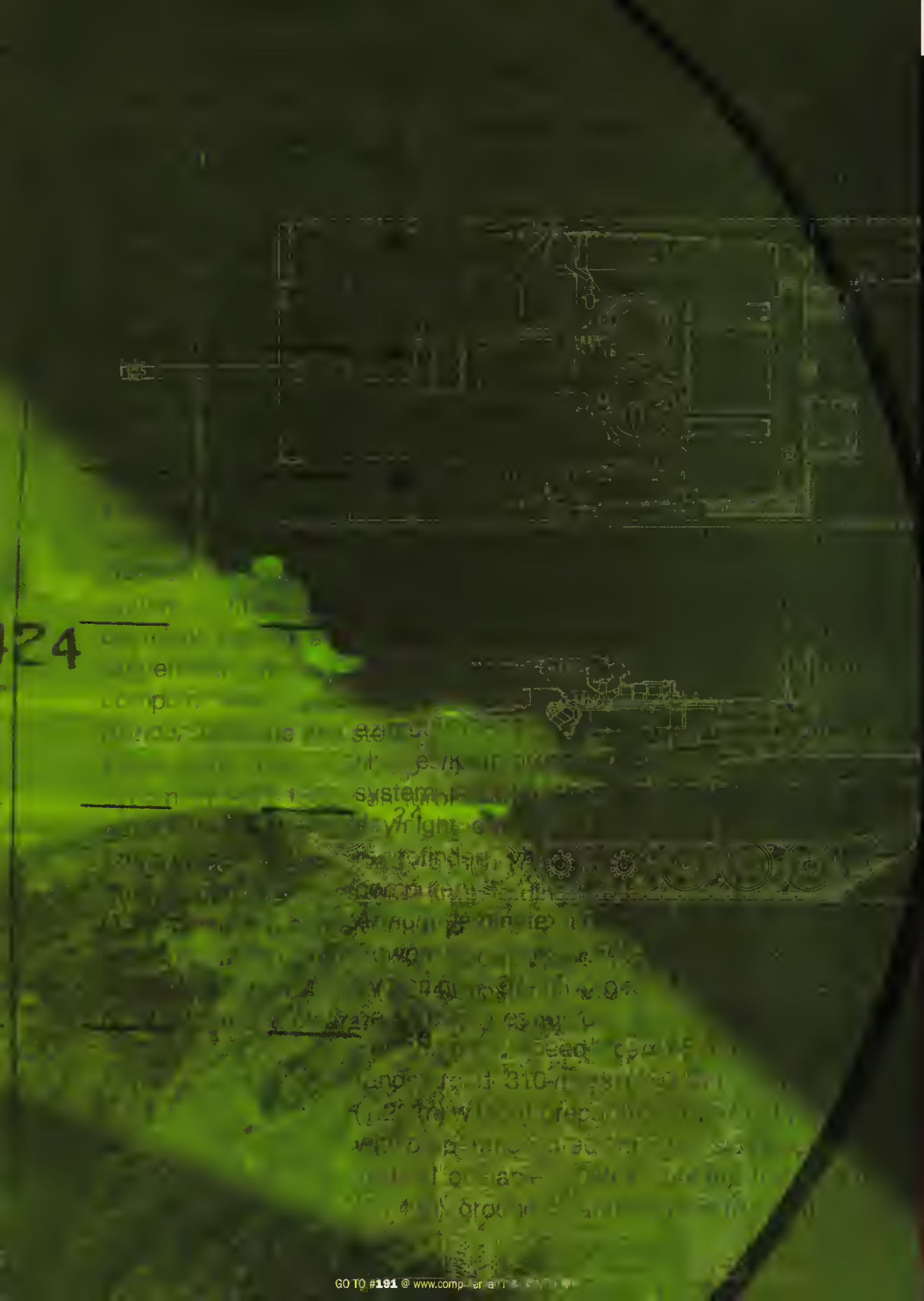
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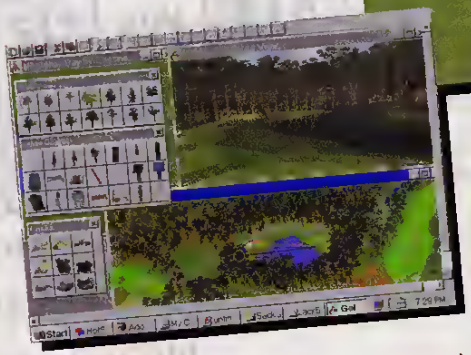


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NEW The course designer is more powerful than ever. Import your own graphics and design custom courses.

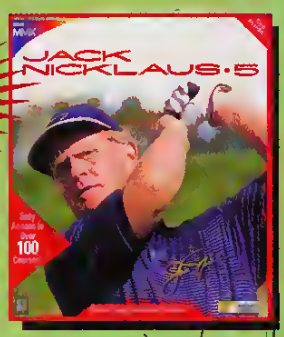
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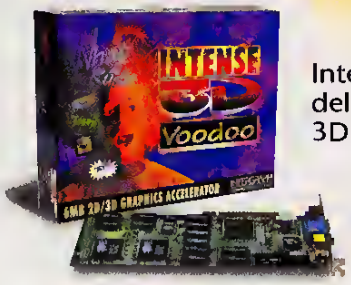


Turok: Dinosaur Hunter



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Computer Gaming World

COVER STORY

World Premiere

DIABLO II

68

What better cure for the winter blues than the red-hot fires of this sequel to *CGW*'s 1996 Game of the Year?

Our own Dark Elf, Elliott Chin, descends into Hell's Kitchen to find out how Blizzard plans to add more RPG elements, while keeping the action as fast and furious as the original.

FEATURES

BUILD YOUR DREAM MACHINE

86



DIABLO fans aren't the only ones condemned to hell. We all face the nightmarish prospect of upgrading our rigs every few years. This month we offer three different paths to peak performance. Regardless of your budget, we'll show you how to build a gaming dynamo, whether you're upgrading or starting from scratch.

PC SPORTS SPECIAL SECTION

179

Whether your sports fantasies consist of robbing Wayne Gretzky of a sure goal, slamming on Shaq, or even gambling on 4th-and-goal against the Steel Curtain, you're sure to find some satisfaction here. Join coach Jeff Green and his all-star team as they separate the contenders from the pretenders in PC sports.



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GAMER'S EDGE

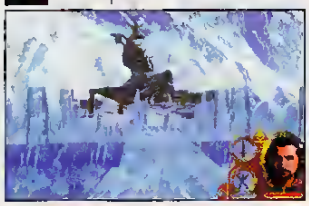
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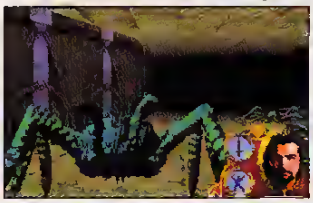




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[Our other columnists are on holiday this month]

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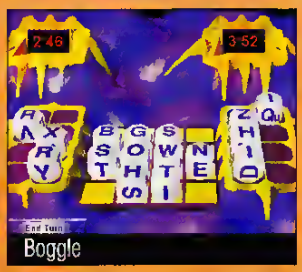
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Abe's Oddysee


Uprising


Ultima Online


Close Combat 2



Boggle


Myth: The Fallen Lords

ACT LOCALLY – KILL



NAME: Douglas McClure

HOMETOWN: Kokomo, IN

RANK IN NET FIGHTER: 1st

DEGREES EARNED: 235,000, traded 27,500 to buy Quake™ in the HEAT store

"I USED TO SMILE AND HAND PEOPLE THEIR FRENCH FRIES, SECRETLY IMAGINING A GIANT TARGET ON EACH ONE'S CHEST AS THEY WALKED TO THE KETCHUP STAND. AFTER I PLAYED OTHERS ON HEAT.NET'S NET FIGHTER, I FELT BETTER AND SUDDENLY ALL THE TARGETS DISAPPEARED!"

HEAT USER NAME: reniu

TOURNAMENT RECORD: 12-2

FAVORITE SPECIAL MOVE: swinging knife decapitation

TRASH TALK EXCERPT: "Now that's what you call a super-close shave!"

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NAME: Bill Shultz

HOMETOWN: Portsmouth, VA

RANK IN NET FIGHTER: 2nd

DEGREES EARNED: 197,500, traded 17,500 to buy Scud: Industrial Evolution™ in the HEAT store

"I USED TO TAKE OUT MY BULLETS, AND ON EACH ONE I WOULD WRITE THE NAME OF EACH PERSON ON MY BUS. THEN A FRIEND SHOWED ME I COULD PURGE MY VIOLENT URGES IN NET FIGHTER ON HEAT.NET AGAINST OTHER PEOPLE. THANKS TO HEAT, THE PEOPLE ON MY BUS WILL NEVER KNOW HOW CLOSE THEY CAME!"

HEAT USER NAME: thunderhammer

TOURNAMENT RECORD: 9-3

FAVORITE SPECIAL MOVE: forked lightning kick

TRASH TALK EXCERPT: "Stop hitting like a sissy girl!"

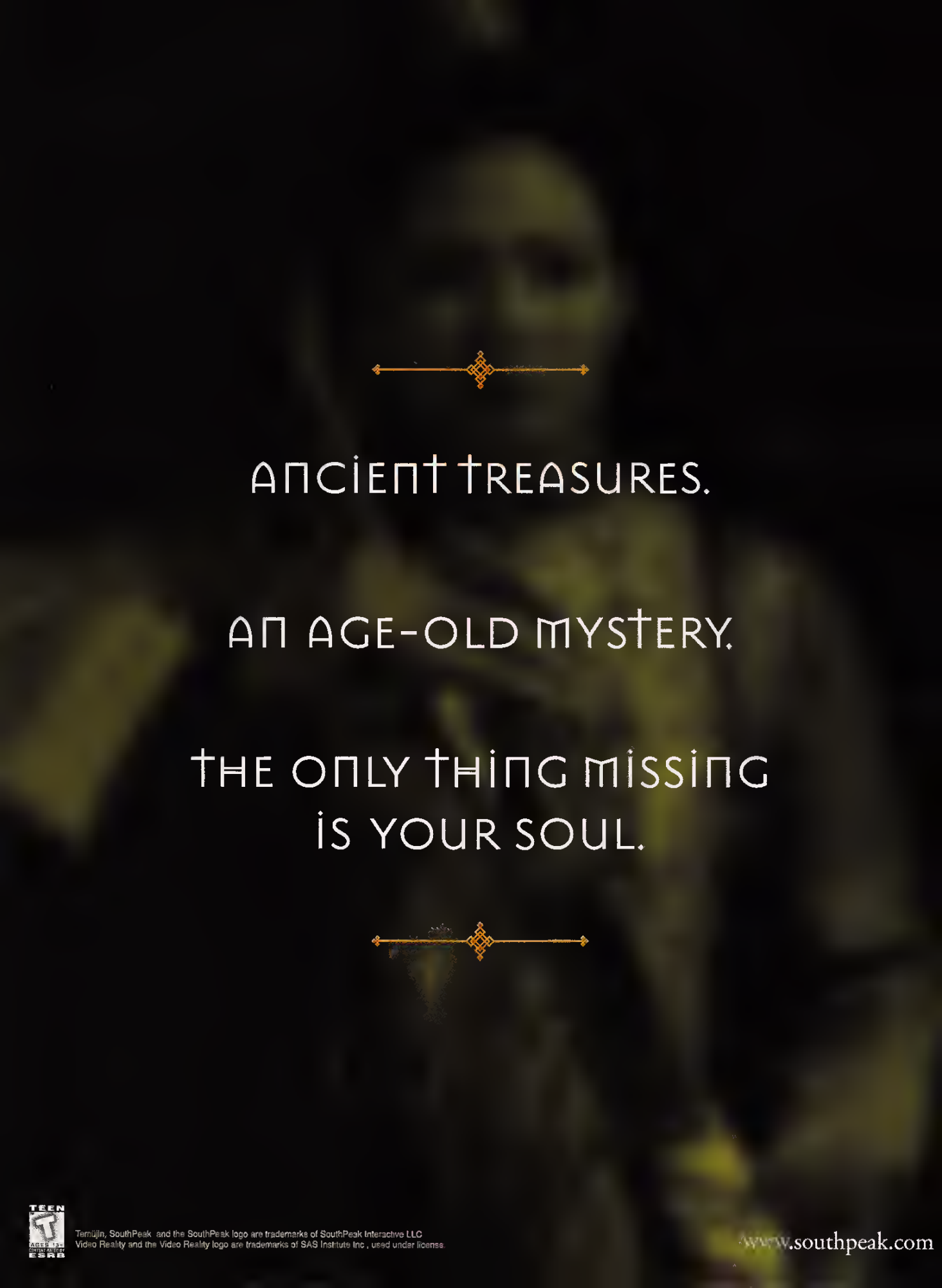
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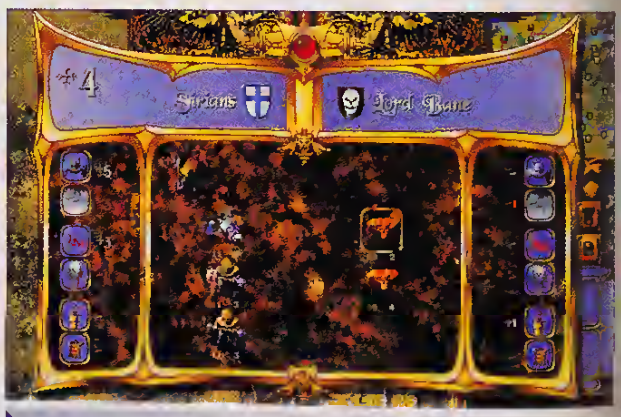
SSG and Red Orb Team Up for a Fantastic Return to the WARLORDS Universe

by Tim Carter

Turn the Critical enters a dark and mysterious dungeon. He encounters an army of zombie programmers, and is victorious! He finds a gem. A big fat gem, in fact—one that will keep him happy for, oh, much more time than he has available.

WARLORDS III, brainchild of the crew at SSG and marketed through Broderbund/Red Orb, is a winner from the minute your fingernails hit the cellophane wrap. Based on one of the few strategy game designs that deserves the accolade "classic," WARLORDS III brings vastly improved depth, replayability, and nuance to an already successful and enjoyable game.

WARLORDS III follows the basic turn-based system of its predecessors for solitaire play, but offers simultaneous turns for those with a hankering for multiplayer mayhem with human opponents. It ran smoothly and rapidly on my Pentium 120 and was fully functional in Windows 95.



WAR IS HELL. WARLORDS III is a turn-based fantasy wargame in which combat is resolved on a strategic scale, as in Civ, not in tactical mode, like MOM.



Price: $49.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 75, Windows 95, 16MB RAM, 40MB hard-disk space, 4x CD-ROM, 256-color SVGA graphics, Sound Blaster 16 or 100-percent-compatible 16-bit sound card, 28Kbps or faster Internet connection.
Multiplayer Support: Modem, direct connect (2 players), LAN, Internet (2-6 players)
Designer: SSG
Publisher: Red Orb Entertainment
Novato, CA
(800) 548-1798
www.redorb.com
Reader Service #: 342

REIGN OF HEROES

True to the original, gameplay in WARLORDS III revolves around the control of fortified cities. Individual units have a dizzying variety of attributes and abilities, and up to eight units may be grouped to form an army. Heroes may explore ruins for treasure or magical items, perform quests for similar rewards, and bestow a number of important combat bonuses to armies that march under their banner.

The command structure, which was pretty clean in WARLORDS I and II, remains quite impressive. Moving around the game will be simple even for someone unfamiliar with the interface.

Little, if anything, seemed to have been left out of previous versions, but quite a bit has been added here. For instance, some of your heroes, depending on their class, may now use magic to augment their abilities, which further depend on the race you are playing.

Unlike past versions of WARLORDS, individual cities no longer produce distinct units. Each race now has a pool of set unit types to draw on, consistent with that race's basic characteristics and attitudes. Any given race may have eight regular troop types, three mercenaries, four hero classes, four magical allies, and one boat unit.

The first time I played this system, I felt a tiny twinge of disappointment. The more limited armies tend to be a bit dull after a while, and battles over castles aren't as massive in proportion. But after only a few games, I could clearly see the wisdom of this design decision. By limiting gamers to a consistent and fixed set of troops, the designers have greatly extended WARLORDS III's replay value. A game on the same map but with a different race is, functionally, an entirely different game. Moreover, within each game, each of the different races you fight present a somewhat different threat, based on the strengths and weaknesses of their core units.

WARLORDS CUBED

For those who love to mix and match, the scenario setup screen lets you create your own race using any of the preexisting units. You are limited only by the total number of different unit types per race.

The setup screen offers a huge number of other options that build replay value as well—including a prohibition on razing cities (an important issue when playing against human opponents), an option that allows neutral cities to grow in power if attacked, and random placement of starting cities.

In addition to the twelve preset scenarios, the game comes with a random scenario generator and—surprise—an intricate campaign game.

As just one example of the playing value in WARLORDS III, the classic Illuria map from the original game is included as one of the preset scenarios. This map constituted the entire game in WARLORDS

Computer Gaming World doesn't



MIGHTY TIM Heroes play an important role in WARLORDS III, since they can hunt for treasure, embark on quests, cast spells, and bestow bonuses on your troops.

l, without many of the options and variations available here. Yet, in WARLORDS III it constitutes a tiny fraction of the complete game. Having spent a dozen or so hours on the Illuria map already, I can say with some certainty that gamers will not easily run out of things to do with WARLORDS III.

CALL TO ARMS

What you do in WARLORDS III, of course, is fight. A lot. The core WARLORDS combat system hasn't changed in structure, but a wide range of modifying factors has been added, giving gamers more options when building their armies or taking out the enemy. For instance, individual leaders or units may contribute positive (to your side) or negative (to your opponent's side) modifiers, while many units also have special attributes or abilities such as assassination attacks, archery attacks, poisoning, and disease.

A major asset of past WARLORDS games was the strength of the AI. WARLORDS III is no slouch in this department, although I found the "Psycho" level somewhat easier than I would have expected for the most difficult level. While the computer still fails to manage its heroes properly (not picking up treasure lying on the ground when an enemy hero is killed, and ignoring some ruins), it has become much more adept at knocking off *your* heroes, particularly if you leave them exposed.

I was especially impressed when the AI, during the fifth or sixth scenario of the campaign, made a systematic effort to kill off the heroes I had been carefully nurturing into powerful higher level paladins and mages. The computer will also raid your home territory frequently and is not averse to scorched-earth tactics if it starts to lose.

According to the manual (generally well done and useful for learning the game and for reference), the diplomatic system has been tweaked considerably from earlier versions. I must admit that I didn't find much functional difference in the new routines. The computer players tended to fight amongst themselves until I had become the biggest single power on the map, at which point they ganged up on me.

FRIENDS AND FOES

Along with the campaign game, the greatest addition to WARLORDS III is the multiplayer option. Playing via the Internet or a LAN, up to six players can compete in a real-time/simultaneous turns mix. Chasing down enemy heroes and deciding the order in which to move—and saving reserves to react at the last second—are now key decisions when playing against live opponents.

This game has little to dislike. If the premise doesn't interest you, you may do better shopping elsewhere, but for fan of fantasy and strategy, or just strategy for that matter, WARLORDS III is a winner from the tiniest elven scout to its Selentine elephant shock cavalry.

APPEAL: Anyone who likes strategy games.

PROS: Fun; ultra-clean; tons of replay value; great campaign; multiplayer support.

CONS: We're still looking.

CG RATED

Campaigning for WARLORDS

New to the WARLORDS system, the campaign game strings together a series of scenarios around a plot that has you lead the Selentines against the evil forces of the undead Lord Bane. Bane has at least one primary ally, and even the powers that are supposedly in your union of good are as likely to send their armies against you as against the principal foe.

The campaign allows you to carry your top heroes and a limited number of magical items from one scenario to the next, which becomes useful as your heroes grow in power. Be careful, though, as the computer becomes quite adept at picking off unguarded high-level heroes left floating too near the front lines.

After each scenario you get the option of upgrading some of your core military units. I found this almost as attractive as carrying heroes forward. Being able to give your heavy infantry more movement and a better attack factor constitutes a major bonus over the course of multiple scenarios.

I also found the scenarios in the campaign—which can't be played separately—to be among the more challenging preset games. In many, your enemies get natural advantages from terrain, the placement of neutral cities, or the starting disposition of forces. This makes a nice change of pace from scenarios in which each side starts out equal.



FOR THE SELENTINES A welcome addition is the campaign in WARLORDS III, in which you battle the undead forces of Lord Bane.

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Don't Myth It

The Hottest Sports and Strategy Games, Plus a Host of Other Goodies on This Month's CD

Strategy and sports gamers, it's your lucky day: This month's CD-RDM is chock-full of your favorite game-types. The definitive hot pick is our exclusive MYTH demo, featuring a special scenario and unit not available anywhere else. If you're still wondering whether or not to buy Activision's DARK REIGN, our latest demo of this real-time strategy game should help you to make up your mind.

For sports fans, there are demos of both the hockey pinnacle, NHL 98, and the promising basketball upstart, NBA ACTION 98. For baseball fans, we've bundled a set of utilities that promise to breathe some new life into the TONY LARUSSA series and DLO TIME BASEBALL. And if you're a fan of arcade racing, be sure to check out DAYTONA USA DELUXE. Golfers, be sure to check out Empire's THE GOLF PRO, starring Gary Player.

We've also included a demo of the fast paced pirate game, SHIPWRECKERS! and Sir-Tech's new action-adventure, EXCALIBUR 2555. TEN has given us a selection of its online games, and for puzzle fans, we have both YOU DON'T KNOW JACK 3 and YOU DON'T KNOW JACK TV. So what are you waiting for? Get started!



DARK REIGN Experience Activision's vision of the future of warfare.



MYTH Play what we like to describe as the Braveheart of computer games.



NBA ACTION 98 Check out the game that could potentially dethrone NBA LIVE.

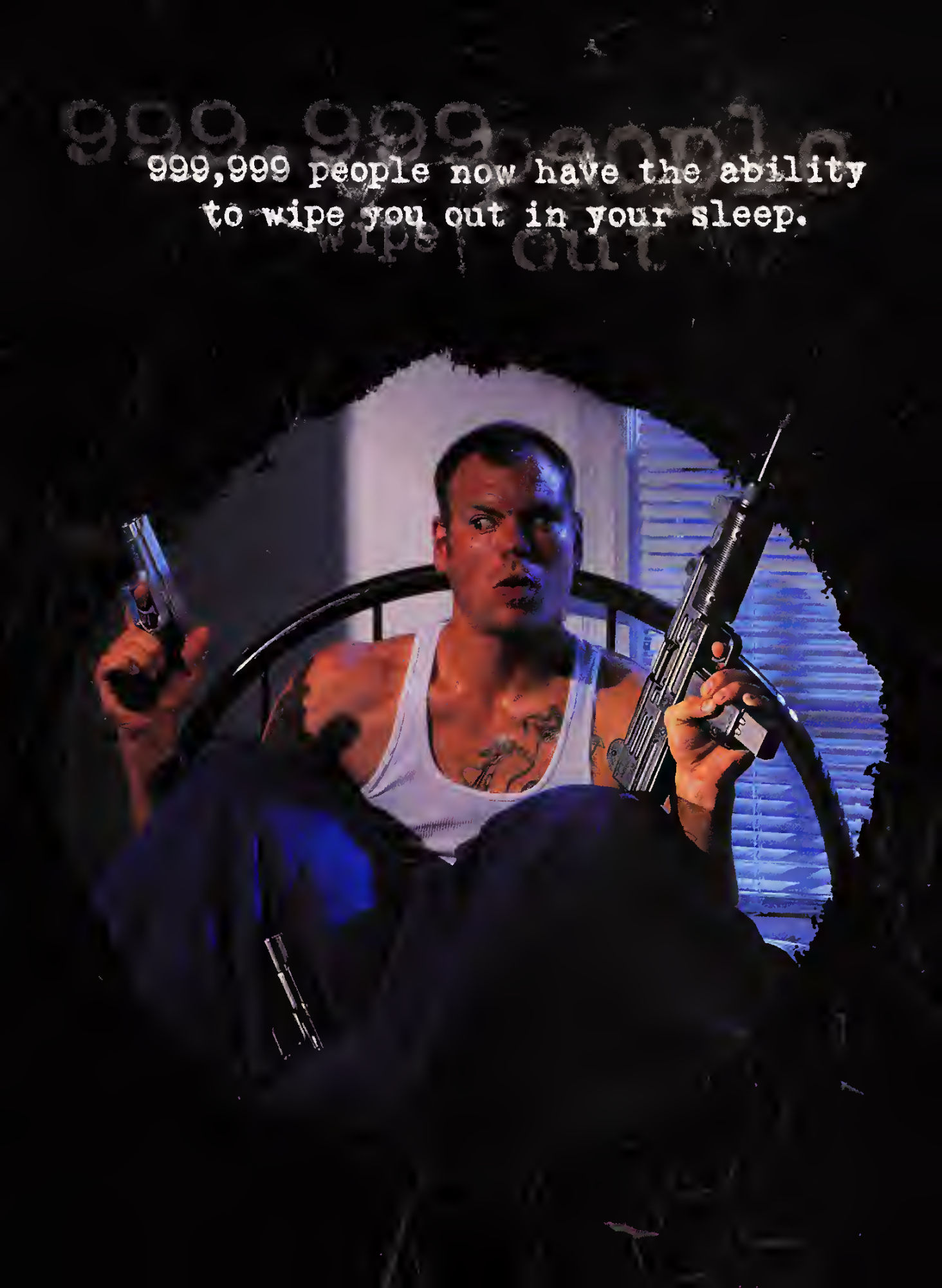


NHL 98 Score a goal or two in this, the definitive computer hockey game

How To Use the Disc

The CD is Autoplay-enabled and should begin when you load it into the CD-ROM drive. Otherwise, select Run from the Program Manager in Windows 3.x, or Start Menu in Windows 95, and type D:\RUN-ME (where D is the letter of your CD-ROM drive) to run it from the CD. You may type D:\INSTALL to create a *CGW* program group on your Windows desktop for future use. Many demos require the disc to be in the drive to run; therefore, we recommend installing the demos from our disc.

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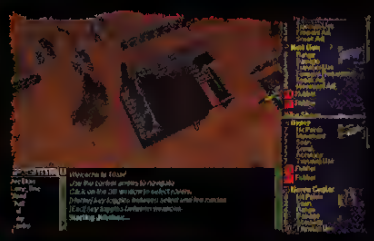
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". . . a thinking man's Descent."* Gamespot
"Action gamers take note!"
Computer Gaming World
"Defiance seems destined to achieve noteworthy status."
Computer Game Entertainment

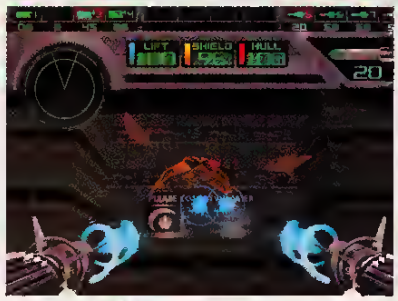


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Computer Gaming World magazine's headline announced, "Avalon Hill's Finest Hour. This Battle of Britain Mixes Real-Time Strategy With Turn-based Tactics." The reviewer went on to say, "For any gamer fascinated by the complexities of many-on-many air combat tactics, or the Battle of Britain in particular, ACHTUNG SPITFIRE's blend of depth, variety, and long-term replayability is sure to please."
CG Choice Award; Rating: ★★★★★

More great praise from *Computer Games Strategy Plus* magazine. Commenting on the player's ability to control each plane's actions, "This strategic element provides the game with that 'up until 2:00 a.m.' dimension that all great wargames possess." "Highly recommended." Stamp of Approval Award; Rating: ★★★★1/2



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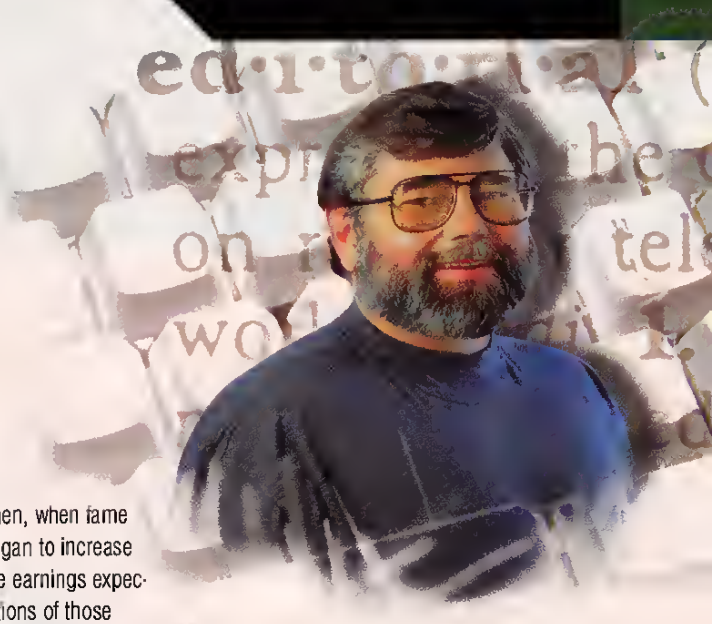
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Death of the Dream

Are Game Publishers Becoming More Market-Savvy or Just Plain Greedy?



The following quotations are taken from the charter of an established computer game publisher. See if you can identify which one. "The work that we publish will be work that appeals to the imagination, as opposed to instincts for gratuitous destruction....Not only will we adhere to these values in our own work, but we will also support the efforts of others working toward the same ends....Above all, we will work with an overriding concern for quality, integrity, and the unimpeded process of imagination."

My personal favorite happens to be, "Most businesses today are founded on the idea of making the greatest possible profit in the least possible time. We are not. We are founded on the idea of accomplishing great things."

Of course, this is the same company in which a well-placed executive once said he could sell dog manure to the customers if he had the right box. It's the same company in which a respected producer asked, "Who cares about the customer, anyway?" Another respected producer once described the company's culture as "enforced mediocrity—the Macintosh mindset." Fortunately, the company wisely sacked the award-winning producer who allowed an Amiga game to languish until the machine was nearly dead and begged, "Can we please just ship this [expletive deleted]?"

Ironically, the company just did what the sacked producer essentially wanted to do. They rushed a high-profile product out the door like a Cesarean section, but went the medical profession one better by throwing the untimely published product into the online seas to sink or swim. Yes, they did just ship that [expletive deleted]!

> **"A well-placed executive said he could sell dog manure to customers if he had the right box."**

Of course, my example merely picks on one prominent company, but this degradation of ideals has taken place throughout our industry. More than one company has promised designers and programmers that they would become the rock stars of the next generation. Then, when fame began to increase the earnings expectations of those new "stars," the companies started deemphasizing the names of the designers and developers on both game boxes and game documentation. More than one company has made the pledge that it was going to hold games until they were finished and ready for release, only to reverse itself when the end of the fiscal quarter drew near. More than one company has pledged that it would support the consumer by adding such features as network play or scenario editors (free of charge) in later patches, only to double-cross gamers with retail add-on packages that were required in order to actually get those same promised features.

Naturally, many savvy readers in the industry are going to glance at this editorial and ask questions that seem, on the surface, to be fair. "Do you think companies can really stay in business while ignoring the profit motive?" "Do you believe for one moment that we could share technology with our competitors without losing our edge?" "Are you saying that we've reduced our commitment to quality?" (My answers—by the way—are no, yes, and yes.)

The truth is that I believe that quality will lead to profit. Shortcuts to quick profits are a negative investment. Gamers may buy one crappy, unfinished product from your company, but they aren't likely to buy two. Yet publishers continue to cut their customer service staffs, reduce the time to play-test their games, and overwork their quality assurance staffs. Why? Because those are cost centers instead of profit centers. This bodes ill for the industry's future.

Further, sharing technology instead of constantly trying to figure out some circumlocutious solution that fights emerging industry standards (and ends up doing one thing better while it does two or three things worse) would advance our industry instead of setting it back. If, as the dreamers in our industry wish, we had standardization, we could reach more potential gamers through ease-of-use and lower costs (for both developers and consumers). Let the wars be fought on the design front, not on the technology front.

Now, I'm enough of a realist to know that we can't always be faithful to our ideals. Changing circumstances force us to compromise, whether we like it or not. Still, once in a while, it helps to go back and look at what we want to be in order to make a course correction and get there. If, of course, we ever believed in the ideals we proclaimed in the first place.


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HALF-LIFE
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–PC Games

L I F E

"The best first-person shooter we've seen."
–Gamespot

"Half-Life has some of the best adversaries in the entire action game genre...[it] eclipses the enemy AI in any other action game to date."
–Computer Gaming World

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"Valve's skeletal animation system provides gamers with some of the most eerily life-like opponents they've ever seen."
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BLADE BUMMER

There was one game noticeably absent from your Holiday Hot 100 Buyer's Guide BLADE RUNNER. I was wondering if there was any reason why it didn't even make the "honorable mention" section.

Jeremy Joyner
from the Internet

Funny you should notice—Westwood did too! The reason we didn't include BLADE RUNNER is because none of our editors were able to play a portion of the game by December press time. We wanted to include only those games we could play and were confident would ship on time. However, by the January issue, we were able to play the game and we were sure it would ship by Christmas, so we included it in the Holiday Gift Guide (CGW #162, page 72). It's nice to have been in error about a ship date on the positive side for a change.

ULTIMA OVERLOOKED?

Your December Buyer's Guide had no mention of ULTIMA ONLINE! I have been a reader of *CGW* for several years and find the Buyer's Guide a valuable tool for keeping *me* aware of the games that are worth purchasing, but you seemed to have missed mentioning one of the biggest advances in gaming technology in a long time.

Steve Wetzel
from the Internet

There's no question that ULTIMA ONLINE is breaking new ground and is worthy of coverage. Indeed, we have written about the game numerous times over the course of its development. However, our Buyer's Guide was strictly for games we could wholeheartedly recommend. ULTIMA ONLINE, in the version we played, was so unstable, buggy, and unbalanced, that—despite its potential—we simply could not recommend it. For a better description of those problems, see our review in this issue.

LETTER OF THE MONTH



APACHE UPRISING

I just finished reading the November 1997 issue of *CGW*, and I was a little upset with a comment made in the "Longbow Restrung" article.

Before I continue, let me address the history of rivalry between the different aircraft associated with the United States Army. Ever since the Vietnam conflict, when the Army realized that it needed to have different aircraft for different missions, pilots of each type of aircraft have claimed to be the "best" Army pilot, regardless of aircraft or mission.

Since I am an AH-64A Apache pilot recently back from a tour in Bosnia, I took some offense to the comment that the Kiowa Warrior was more suited to recon than an AH-64. It was claimed that "because it has a nose-mounted TADS, the Longbow must be completely exposed to use the system."

As all Apache pilots and, I'm sure, many computer gamers know, employing your equipment to exploit its strengths is integral to winning the battle. The easy method of laterally unmasking prevents exposing the entire aircraft. Simply put, poke the nose of the aircraft out from behind some trees perpendicular to where you wish to see, then orient the TADS 90 degrees to either side and take a look for yourself. This method exposes only the nose of the aircraft, which isn't much more than a TADS on a Kiowa.

As with most equipment, whether computer-generated or real, knowing it intimately is key to employing it properly.

Brian C. Stehle
Cpt., U.S. Army

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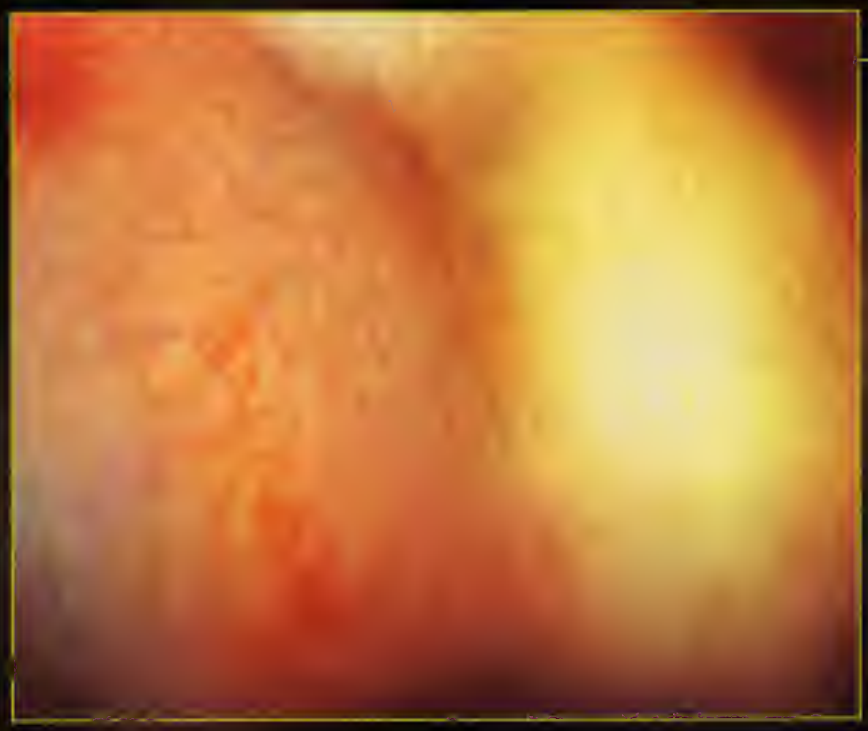
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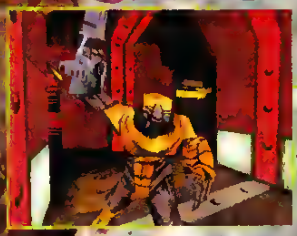


what is sin?



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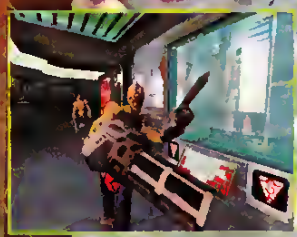
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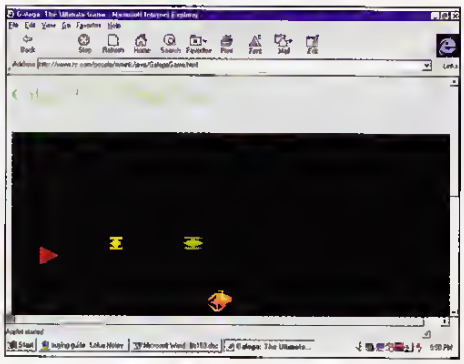
I am unable to remem'ber what game compilation you mentio' in your magazine that included POLI SITION. Can you help?

Nancy Donnell
Round Mountain, NV

Sure, we'll answer your letter together with this next one.

I am looking for arcade games from the early/mid-1980s. I have seen the two Microsoft Arcade packages, but also would like to know if there are other games from that era available. Specifically, I am looking for games such as DONKEY KONG, DEFENDER, TRON, and GALAGA.

Todd Williamson
from the Internet



*We can't help you much with those particular titles. There is a version of GALAGA on the Web (**www.fsr.com/people/rumink/java/Galaga.html**), but as with many games on the Web, it could be shut down by the trademark holder at any time. For the benefit of others who may be looking for arcade classics, here are the lists for five different compilations.*

Atari 2600 Action Pack for Windows *(Activision): BOXING, CHOPPER COMMAND, COSMIC COMMUTER, CRACKPOTS, FISHING DERBY, FREEWAY, FROSTBITE, GRAND PRIX, H.E.R.O., KABOOM!, PITFALL!, RIVER RAID, SEAQUEST, SKY JINKS, and SPIDER FIGHTER.*

Atari 2600 Action Pack 2 for Windows *(Activision): ATLANTIS, BARNSTORMING, DOLPHIN, DRAGSTER, ENDURO, ICE HOCKEY, KEYSTONE KAPERS, LASER BLAST, MEGAMANIA, OINK, PLAQUE ATTACK, RIVER RAID II, SKIING, STAMPEDE, and TENNIS.*

Atari 2600 Action Pack 3 for Windows 95 (Activision): *BREAKOUT, CANYON BOMBER, CHECKERS, COMBAT, DOUBLE DRAGON, NIGHT DRIVER, PRESSURE COOKER, PRIVATE EYE, SPACE WAR, STARMASTER, TITLE MATCH PRO WRESTLING, and YARS' REVENGE.*

Microsoft Arcade: *ASTEROIDS, CENTIPEDE, MISSILE COMMAND, plus—BATTLEZONE and TEMPEST.*

Return of Microsoft Arcade: *DIG-DUG, GALAXIAN, PAC MAN, and POLE POSITION.*

HOLLYWOOD COMMANDER

I have always enjoyed the WING COMMANDER series. I recently saw the movie *Starship Troopers* and I was wondering if Origin plans to come out with a WING COMMANDER movie.

Calvin Ng
from the Internet

Electronic Arts recently sold the rights to develop a WING COMMANDER movie or cartoon television series, or both, to Digital Anvil, the company founded by WING COMMANDER creator Chris Roberts. Roberts has long held that the title would make an excellent film property.

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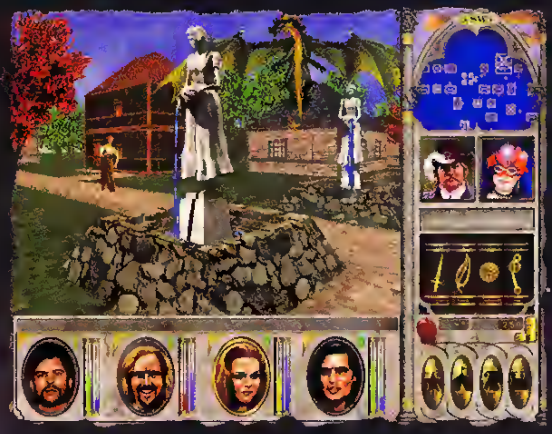
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Edited by Charlotte Panther (CPanther@zd.com)

Jacksonville Wins Super Bowl

CGW Sims the Big Game So You Don't Have to Watch



PHOTO BY ALLSPORT

Another boring Super Bowl party? Don't waste your time! Using Sierra's FRONT PAGE SPORTS: FOOTBALL PRO 98, *CGW* has already determined that the Jacksonville Jaguars, behind lefty QB Mark Brunnell (who throws right-handed in FPS 98, by the way) will dump Steve Young and the 49ers by the rather unusual score of 12–8.

This year's Super Snooze Fest will be led by Jacksonville's Natrone Means, who will run over and around the Niner defense for 104 yards. Now that you know, you don't have to blow Super Bowl Sunday in front of your television. Blow it in front of your computer instead, playing some of the season's hot new games.

How did we make our predictions? Simple. First we downloaded the mid season player ratings from Gridiron Flashback, an excellent Web site **(http://www.courant.infi.net~mpfl/fpsf.htm)** devoted to the FRONT PAGE series. Then, using our newly updated rosters, we played the season from Week 13 onward with FPS 98's Fast Sim feature. We cheated a little by starting with the NFL teams' actual records through Week 12. Although there were a few surprises (the Broncos choked in the playoffs again, for example), the teams that made it to the Super Bowl certainly seemed plausible. For the big dance, we played a standard FRONT PAGE game, with the CPU controlling both teams and using the regular physics-based model. Obviously, the Jags had better physics than the Niners.

—Dennis McCauley

FINAL NFL STANDINGS

AFC EAST			
X Miami	10	6	
Y New York Jets	9	7	
New England	9	7	
Buffalo	7	9	
Indianapolis	3	13	
AFC CENTRAL			
X Jacksonville	12	4	
Y Pittsburgh	10	6	
Tennessee	7	9	
Baltimore	6	9	1
Cincinnati	5	11	
AFC WEST			
X Denver	11	5	
Y Kansas City	10	6	
Seattle	8	8	
San Diego	7	9	
Oakland	7	9	

NFC EAST			
X NY Giants	9	7	
Y Dallas	9	7	
Philadelphia	8	7	1
Washington	8	8	
Arizona	4	12	
NFC CENTRAL			
X Minnesota	11	5	
Y Green Bay	10	6	
Y Tampa Bay	10	6	
Detroit	8	8	
Chicago	3	13	
NFC WEST			
X San Francisco	14	2	
Carolina	9	7	
New Orleans	6	10	
St. Louis	5	11	
Atlanta	4	12	

PLAYOFFS

Wildcard

Kansas City at Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh 24–23

NY Jets at Miami
Miami 33–3

Tampa Bay at NY Giants
NY Giants 20–19

Dallas at Green Bay
Green Bay 19–10

Divisional

Miami at Denver
Miami 14–7

Pittsburgh at Jacksonville
Jacksonville 31–3

Green Bay at Minnesota
Green Bay 23–13

NY Giants at San Francisco
San Francisco 23–13

AFC Championship

Miami at Jacksonville
Jacksonville 26–17

NFC Championship

Green Bay at San Francisco
San Francisco 20–9

Super Bowl

San Francisco 49ers
vs. Jacksonville Jaguars
Jacksonville 12–8

I-'76 Funks You Again

The '70s are back and bigger than ever. INTERSTATE '76 is also coming back for a second go-round in the form of a multimission expansion pack—INTERSTATE '76 NITRO PACK: THE VIGILANTE FILES. This game has a long name and a long list of enhancements for the original game

The NITRO PACK is a psuedo prequel. It's a collection of standalone missions that take place before the events of INTERSTATE '76. There is no campaign or running story, but the missions all have the same informative, colorful voiceovers and goals. You'll be able to play several missions as Taurus, Skeeter, or Jade

The NITRO PACK has 3D support right out of the box for the 3Dfx, Rendition, and ST8 Nitro cards, as well as force feedback support. The graphics for the NITRO PACK are a treat, and the gameplay is boosted with the inclusion of nine new cars and several new weapons. Multiplay is also enhanced with capture-the-flag and traditional racing scenarios

Best of all, the NITRO PACK does *not* require a copy of the original game. The VIGILANTE FILES should be available in stores by March 1998. —*Elliott Chin*



THE ORIGINAL TEAM You can play missions as Taurus (left), Jade(right), or Skeeter (not pictured).

The visual experience is enhanced, while the great gameplay of the original I-'76 remains intact. The NITRO PACK offers new vehicles such as an Army Jeep, a limousine, an ice cream truck, and a hearse.

Player Stats



GRAPHIC BY XPLANE

News Flash

Kesmai Corporation recently announced that it has teamed up with **Engage** Games Online and **SegaSoft**'s HEAT.NET to form GameStorm, a new online gaming service. GameStorm will allow gamers to choose from a huge selection of games including massively multiplayer titles from Kesmai and Engage and fast action games from HEAT.NET, all for a flat membership fee of $9.95 per month. The service will also feature news, reviews, and downloads from *GameSpot*. For more information, head to **www.gamestorm.com**

The **Cyberathlete Organization** recently announced the formation of a new gamers' league called the **Cyberathelete Professional League (CPL)**. The CPL will introduce a new Cyberathelete ranking system, and tournaments will be regulated by a board of directors consisting of **Ion Storm**'s Mike Wilson and John Romero, **Ritual Entertainment**'s Harry Miller and Mike Wardwell, and **QUAKE Clan-Ring**'s Frank Cabanski. The first CPL tournament will take place in Dallas on March 6, and is expected to attract about 2,000 players worldwide. The tournament will have cash prizes totaling about $50,000, as well as other prizes such as computer systems, peripherals, and games. Check out **www.cyberathelete.com** for further information and updates

In our review of SMART GAMES CHALLENGE # 2 last month, we listed **RandomSoft** as the product's distributor. While RandonSoft continues to distribute all other **Smart Games** titles, CHALLENGE #2 will be distributed by Smart Games, Inc. The correct number for orders is (888) 427 2469

PLAYING LATELY

CGW Survey

	Last Month	Months on Chart
1. **Diablo** (Blizzard/CUC)	1	10
2. **Quake** (id Software)	2	14
3. **Civilization II** (MicroProse)	3	21
4. **Red Alert** (Westwood/Virgin)	5	11
5. **Dungeon Keeper** (BullFrog/EA)	4	3
6. **Heroes II: POL** (New World Computing)	9	5
7. **Duke Nukem 3D** (3D Realms)	7	21
8. **X-COM: Apocalypse** (MicroProse)	6	3
9. **Heroes II** (New World Computing)	10	10
10. **Tomb Raider** (Eidos)	-	7

Check your mailbox. We mail a survey to 1,500 randomly-chosen subscribers each month. The results of Playing Lately indicate what games readers are blowing the most time on, as opposed to the reader's overall "quality ranking" in the Top 100.

PC Data Best-Sellers**

1. **Microsoft Flight Simulator 98** (Microsoft)	1
2. **Riven: The Sequel to Myst** (Broderbund/RedOrb)	-
3. **Jedi Knight** (LucasArts)	-
4. **Myst** (Broderbund)	2
5. **Lego Island** (Mindscape)	-
6. **C&C: Aftermath** (Westwood/Virgin)	-
7. **Age of Empires** (Microsoft)	-
8. **Deer Hunter** (GT Interactive)	-
9. **Ultima Online** (Origin/EA)	-
10 **NHL Hockey '98** (EA Sports)	-

...last month indicates what that retailing PC games were, as calculated by PC Data, during October, 1997.

Low-priced Software, No Mumbo Chumbo

The holidays are over and you're broke, but there are tons of games out there that Santa didn't bring you. Well now there's a way to get your mitts on all the hot titles, right when you want them, without giving your bank manager an embolism.

Following in the footsteps of companies like Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble online, Chumbo Corporation recently made its debut in the world of e-commerce. Instead of selling books, however, Chumbo is offering software—with all the hottest games available at an extra-low price. Chumbo claims that because it is conducting business via the Internet, which requires less overhead than a regular business, it is able to pass on the savings directly to the customer. Chumbo has established a partnership with the Point Group, a company that specializes in creating bundles of software, who will put together exclusive packages, providing added value for users.

Chumbo has also teamed up with software distributor Merisel to ensure the availability of software as soon as a customer places an order. Gamers can also place advance orders to be guaranteed a copy of an eagerly anticipated title the day it ships.



According to Chumbo's founder and president, David Prais, the more a gamer uses the site, the more personal the experience will become. Chumbo will watch and analyze the behavior of individual shoppers, pinpointing their interests and presenting them with special offers in line with their specific needs. Should customers request it, Chumbo's Push technology will automatically download demos, reviews, and news to the person's machine when it is not in use. The site will also feature game reviews and tips provided by ZDNet. Ready to shop? Head over to **www.chumbo.com** and you're sure to pick up a bargain. —*Charlotte Panther*

THIS JUST IN

Short takes on games and hardware released just prior to press time.

BLADE RUNNER

If CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND represents the pinnacle of old-school adventure gaming, BLADE RUNNER does the same for new school adventuring. Though it may not be a true-3D real-time adventure, it's still an excellent game. The beautiful prerendered backgrounds and the stunning sound effects borrow elements from both the film and the novel to create an immersive atmosphere. The game is nonlinear, and gameplay involves randomly deciding who is, and who is not, a Replicant. Though the player characters are extremely pixelated (a disappointment after seeing the cut-scenes), and there are some interface issues, the overall product is superb. —*Thierry Nguyen*



Westwood Entertainment, (800) 874-4607, www.westwood.com, Win 95 CD-ROM

VIRTUAL POOL 2

Interplay/VR Sport's VIRTUAL POOL 2 has some cool new features, including 3D hardware accelerator support (via Direct3D), greatly enhanced graphics, and a better cue-control system. One frustrating thing VP2 does on install is make you sit through a trailer for an upcoming Interplay *Star Trek* title. After that annoyance, however, VP2 is terrific, offering a wide variety of billiards games, including nine ball,



Action Guys & Dolls

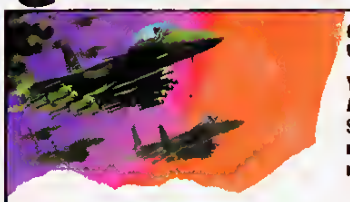
Nothing beats the movie business for merchandise tie-ins, but if more software companies follow the example of GT Interactive and Eidos, it might not be long before fast-food vendors are touting five-inch miniatures of your favorite computer-game character with your cheeseburger.

GT has joined forces with toy maker ReSaurus to develop a line of Duke Nukem action figures, based upon the smart-mouthed antihero of Apogee/3D Realm's DUKE NUKEM game series. Available now, Duke comes armed with a two-handed Devestator, two Uzis, and a bloody knife. If you buy over the Internet, (**www.resaurus.com/dukepage1.html**) your purchase will include a DUKE NUKEM shareware CD plus a limited-production Freeze Thrower, for $12.99. The retail version ($7.99) will not include the CD, and only 1 out of 12 units sold in stores will include the special-edition weapon. ReSaurus has three other DUKE 3D characters currently in development—Pigcop, Battlelord Boss, and Octabrain. Action figures based on the upcoming DUKE NUKEM FOREVER characters are also in the works, and will be ready in time for the release of the game.





Move over Barbie—Lara Croft is now gracing toy store shelves, too. Toy Biz, the creators of Marvel's *The Amazing Spiderman*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *and X-Men* action figures recently teamed up with Eidos to create an action figure of the sassy TOMB RAIDER heroine. Lara comes armed with an assortment of weapons from the game, and the toy line also takes into account the...er...enhancements Lara received in TOMB RAIDER II. At press time, the action figure's exact price had not been determined, but Eidos did confirm that it would retail for less than $10. —*Charlotte Panther*



Summer Sim Sweepstakes Winners

You may remember that way, way back in August, we held our Summer Sim Sweepstakes Competition. Well, the good news is that we have three lucky winners. The bad news is that not all of the games in our prize deluxe flight sim package have been released yet. But, what the heck? We've kept you in suspense long enough. So, now, the moment you've all been waiting for...

Grand Prize: Roderick LeVan of Rock Hill, SC. Roderick wins the Thunderseat Technologies Thunderseat, a CH Products Force FX Joystick, a leather bomber jacket, and the deluxe flight sim package.

1st Prize: Fred Wickman of Fairfield, CA. Fred wins ACT Laboratory's EagleMAX Joystick, ACT Laboratory's Powerramp Gamepad, and the deluxe flight sim package.

2nd Prize: Dwane Worden of Houston, TX. Dwane wins our deluxe flight sim package, which includes nine of the best flight sims around.

eight-ball, straight pool, and different sets of rules (American, English, APA, BCA). You can also play VP2 multiplayer over modem, LAN, or Internet. If you're bonkers for billiards, then check this one out. —*Dave Salvator*

Interplay, (800) INTERPLAY
www.interplay.com
PC CD-ROM

THE CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND

After six long years, Guybrush Threepwood finally makes his triumphant return in the latest installment of the MONKEY ISLAND series. While other companies were busy cloning Myst, LucasArts stuck to its guns, learned from its mistakes, and created a new adventure game in the old-school style.

Featuring lush, colorful graphics; decent voiceovers, and witty dialogue that zings back and forth between Guybrush and the other characters, CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND shows that you can still make a great adventure game the old fashioned way. This, along with ZORK GRAND INQUISITOR, could mark the beginning of an adventure game renaissance.

—*Thierry Nguyen*

LucasArts Entertainment,
(800) 985-8227
www.lucasarts.com
Win 95 CD-ROM



News Flash

Origin has granted an option to acquire the live-action feature film and television rights to its WING COMMANDER game series. The rights were granted to **Digital Anvil**, the company led by WING COMMANDER creator Chris Roberts. The film will be based on characters, storylines, and themes from titles one through four of the WING COMMANDER series, which were developed by Origin over the past eight years.

After daring to tear apart great American institutions such as *Star Wars* and *The X-Files*, **Parroty Interactive** is back, and this time its unfortunate victim is a certain Mr. Gates. Entitled MICROSHAFT WINBLOWS 98, Parroty's product pokes fun at **Microsoft**—the company, the software, and the man who made it all possible. *Bill's Personal Outlook* allows you to snoop through Mr. Gates' "to do" list, email, and journal. In the board game *The Roll Ahead*, players can "Be Like Bill" acquiring corporations and investing millions; Winblows Exploder lets you shoot your way through a universe of computer bugs and error messages. Our favorite, though, is the Billagotchi—a cyberpet that thrives if you feed it lots of money, but will throw tantrums if you don't give it the attention it deserves.

Speaking of cyberpets, Tamagotchi creator, **Bandai**, has developed a CD-ROM version of the lovable little alien, available for about the same price as the key-chain pet. The CD-ROM includes a couple of extra features, the best of which is a day care center where you can deposit your pet, without feeling guilty, whenever other duties call. For more information head to **www.bdec.com**.








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We're Not Dead Yet!

But Recent Moves Suggest That 7th Level Is in Need of Some Life Support

7th Level shocked the gaming industry recently with the announcement that its highly successful *Monty Python* game line was on the selling block. The news came just a few months after Ion Storm's acquisition of 7th Level's real-time strategy game, DOMINION (along with its designer, Todd Porter). All this activity left 7th Level with just one major gaming title, RETURN TO KRONDOR, the role playing game by best-selling science-fiction fantasy author Raymond Feist, and the true sequel to Sierra On Line's acclaimed BETRAYAL AT KRONDOR.

All was revealed at Comdex, where 7th Level made yet another announcement—that it had acquired Pulse Entertainment, developers of adventure game BAD MOJO and the upcoming 3D shooter SPACE BUNNIES MUST DIE. The two companies have merged management and operations to form a new company called P7 Solutions. P7 will no longer publish games, and will instead focus on Internet solutions.

So what about the games? Well, Take 2 Interactive, publishers of RIPPER, the upcoming BLACK DAHLIA, and the JET FIGHTER series, acquired distribution rights to all the *Monty Python* titles, then immediately sold all American distribution rights to Panasonic Interactive Media. Take 2 retains the European distribution rights. The latest title in the *Monty Python* series, THE MEANING OF LIFE, a strategy/adventure game containing previously unreleased film footage and new dialogue from all the original cast members, is still scheduled for a December release. As for the Pulse titles, the members of the SPACE BUNNIES MUST DIE production team have formed a new company, Jinx, and will continue to work on the product. According to Jinx CEO Vinny Carrella, Ripcord (a division of Panasonic Interactive Media) and P7, which are both minority shareholders in Jinx, have been very supportive in helping the company get off the ground. Carrella is enthusiastic about the new move. "It's like moving out of your parents' house for the first time—it's really scary, but it's also really exciting." Plans for Ripcord to publish SPACE BUNNIES are still going ahead, and the game is set to meet its summer 1998 schedule.

And, in a surprise move, Sierra announced that it had acquired PyroTechnix from 7th Level, bringing the KRONDOR series back into the fold. Sierra Northwest, the company's Seattle-based development division, is working with Raymond Feist and PyroTechnix, and the company anticipates a late 1998 release for the game.

—Charlotte Panther

THIS JUST IN

SWIV

SWIV first appeared on the Amiga, then migrated to the Super Nintendo Entertainment System before its latest stop on the PC. SWIV is nothing spectacular—it's basically a quick action-arcade romp with some pretty eye candy. In the game, you pilot different vehicles across a variety of levels and terrain types. As with many other arcade shooters, SWIV offers a variety of power-ups to make your vehicle tougher, faster, and the like. The game also has 3Dfx acceleration, and the terrain looks nice. Ultimately, though, SWIV is a simple shoot-'em-up that offers nothing truly groundbreaking to the genre.

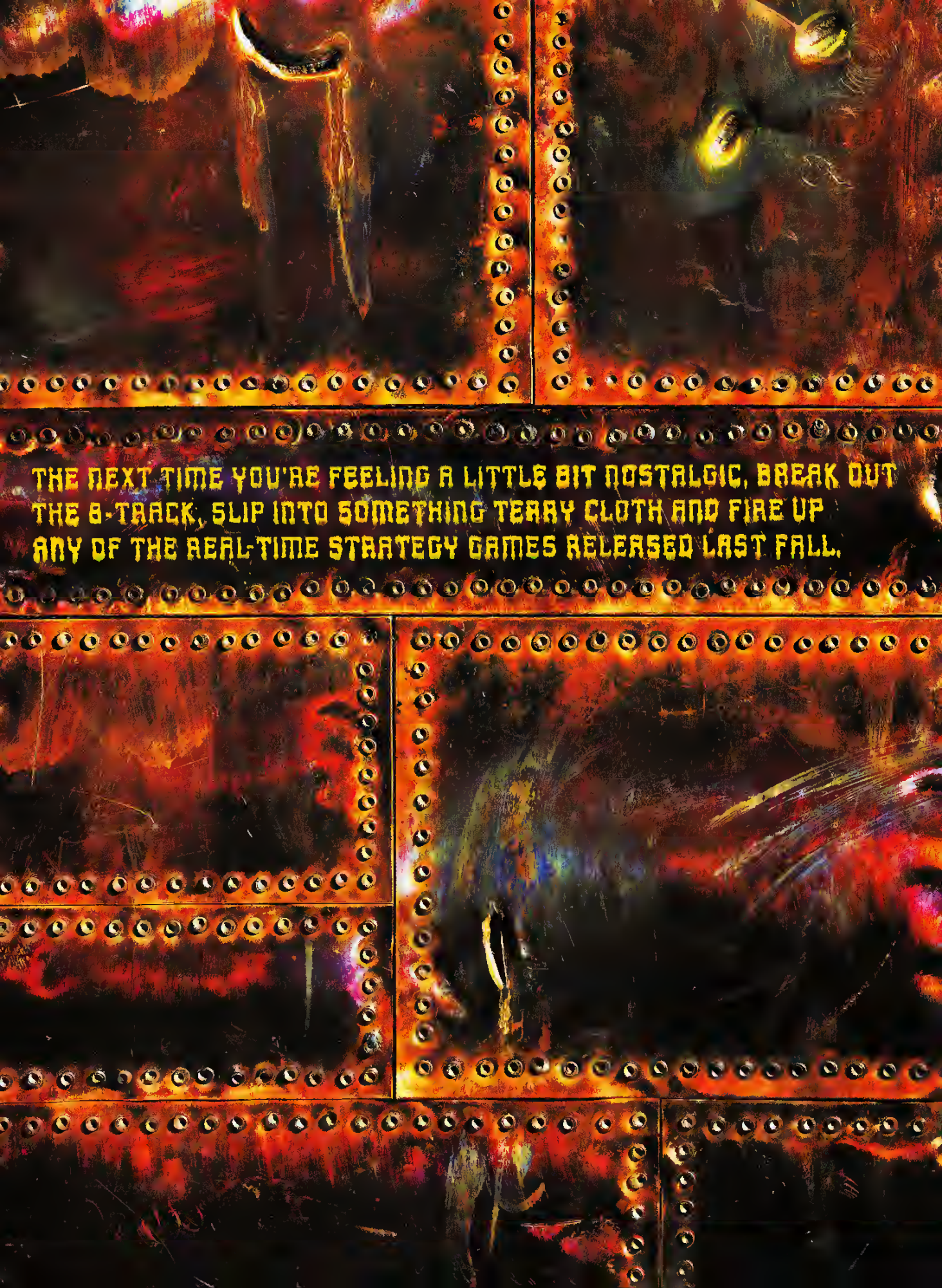
—Thierry Nguyen



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PIPELINE

Aces: X-Fighters Sierra	Fall 98
Asheron's Call Turbine/Microsoft	Spring 98
Battlezone Activision	Spring 98
Daikatana Ion Storm/Eidos	3/98
Descent Freespace Interplay	4/98
Earthsiege 3 Sierra	Spring 98
Falcon 4.0 MicroProse	3/98
Final Fantasy VII Squaresoft	4/98
Freedom in the Galaxy Avalon Hill	Fall 98
Great Battles of Caesar Interactive Magic	6/98
Grim Fandango LucasArts	Spring 98
Guardians: Agents of Justice MicroProse	4/98
Half-Life Valve/Sierra	3/98
Hidden Wars Ronin	2/98
IA-10 Warthog Interactive Magic	Fall 98
iF/A-18 Interactive Magic	4/98
iPonzer 44 Interactive Magic	2/98
Jagged Alliance II Sir-Tech	4/98
Jane's F-15 EA/Jane's	Spring 98
Journeyman Project 3 Broderbund	2/98
M-1 Tank Platoon II MicroProse	3/98
MechCommander MicroProse	4/98
MiG Alley Empire	Summer 98
Of Light & Darkness Interplay	3/98
Populous: The Third Coming EA/Bullfrog	2/98
Quest For Glory V Sierra	Spring 98
Redguard Bethesda	Spring 98
Revolution Ferris Wolf/GT Interactive	Fall 98
Semper Fi Interactive Magic	2/98
Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri Firaxis/EA	Summer 98
Sin Activision	3/98
Squad Leader Big Time/Avalon Hill	Fall 98
Stratogo Hasbro	Fall 98
TFX 3 DID	1/98
Ubik Cryo	2/98
Ultimate Civ II MicroProse	5/98
WarCraft Adventures Blizzard	4/98
Warhammer: Dark Omen EA	3/98
X-Files Adventure Game Fox Interactive	Summer 98
Xfire Sir-Tech	2/98


THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE FEELING A LITTLE BIT NOSTALGIC, BREAK OUT
THE 8-TRACK, SLIP INTO SOMETHING TERRY CLOTH AND FIRE UP
ANY OF THE REAL-TIME STRATEGY GAMES RELEASED LAST FALL.


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RULES MUST BE BROKEN. CATEGORIES MUST BE ERASED. EMPERORS MUST BE OVERTHROWN. THE STATUS QUO MUST BE SPANKED. AND CONTENTMENT MUST BE ROUTINELY TAKEN OUTSIDE AND SMACKED UPSIDE THE HEAD. IT'S A DIRTY JOB, BUT SOMEBODY HAS TO DO IT. AND WE'RE ALL READY TO APPLY FOR THE POSITION.

WE'RE ION STORM, A BUNCH OF MISFIT, ZEALOT FREAKS WHO TRIED TO REST ON OUR PAST SUCCESSES BUT JUST DIDN'T FIND IT COMFORTABLE. THERE WAS A GAP OUT THERE. A BIG FAT VOID, AND WE WERE HELL-BENT ON FILLING IT. WE HAD ALL LIVED ON THE EDGE, BUT WE WERE READY TO JUMP OFF. SO HERE WE ARE. NEW NAME. NEW IDENTITY. NEW GAMES RATTLING THEIR CAGES, WAITING TO BE LET OUT.

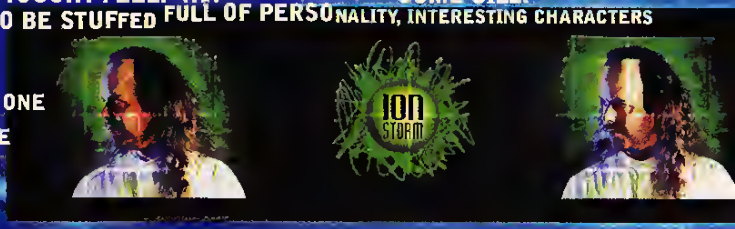
INTO

JOHN ROMERO: LONG-HAIRED SMART-ASS KNOWN FOR HIS FAST FERRARI AND HIS UNCANNY ABILITY TO SING THE THEME SONG TO THE SPIDERMAN CARTOON REALLY, REALLY WELL. OH YEAH, THERE WAS ALSO THAT DOOM AND QUAKE THING.



TOM HALL: A FUNNY GUY WHO WANTS TO GET ALL TOUCHY-FEELY WITH HIS GAMES. HAS SOME SILLY IDEA THAT COMPUTER GAMES HAVE TO BE STUFFED FULL OF PERSONALITY, INTERESTING CHARACTERS AND INTERACTIVITY. IN A PAST LIFE, HE CO-CREATED WOLFENSTEIN 3D, DOOM AND RISE OF THE TRIAD, AND WAS ONE OF THE ORIGINAL FOUNDERS OF SOME SMALL COMPANY CALLED ID.





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DOMINION. DOPPELGANGER. DAMN

ION STORM

EIDOS INTERACTIVE

THE EYE OF THE STORM



ION STORM

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FIRST-EVER

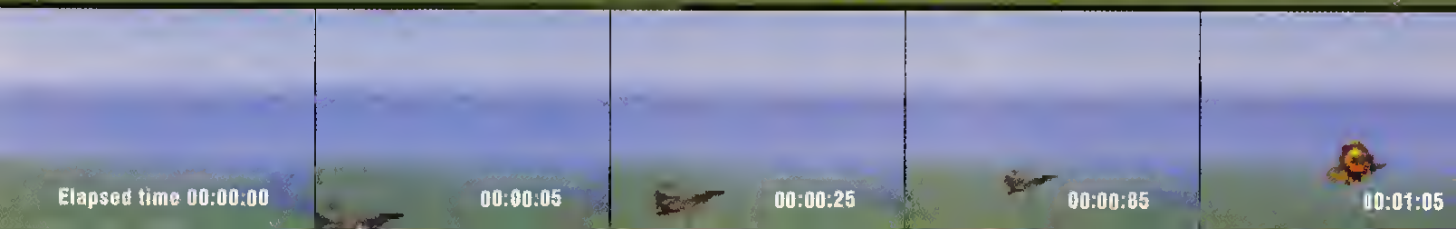
To feature the revolutionary ISF™ graphics that enables fluid redraws in color resolutions up to 1024x768x16 with no pixellation (and at a playable frame rate).

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ONLINE GAMING REVIEW (COMPUTER PLAYER)

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Flying Nightmares 2

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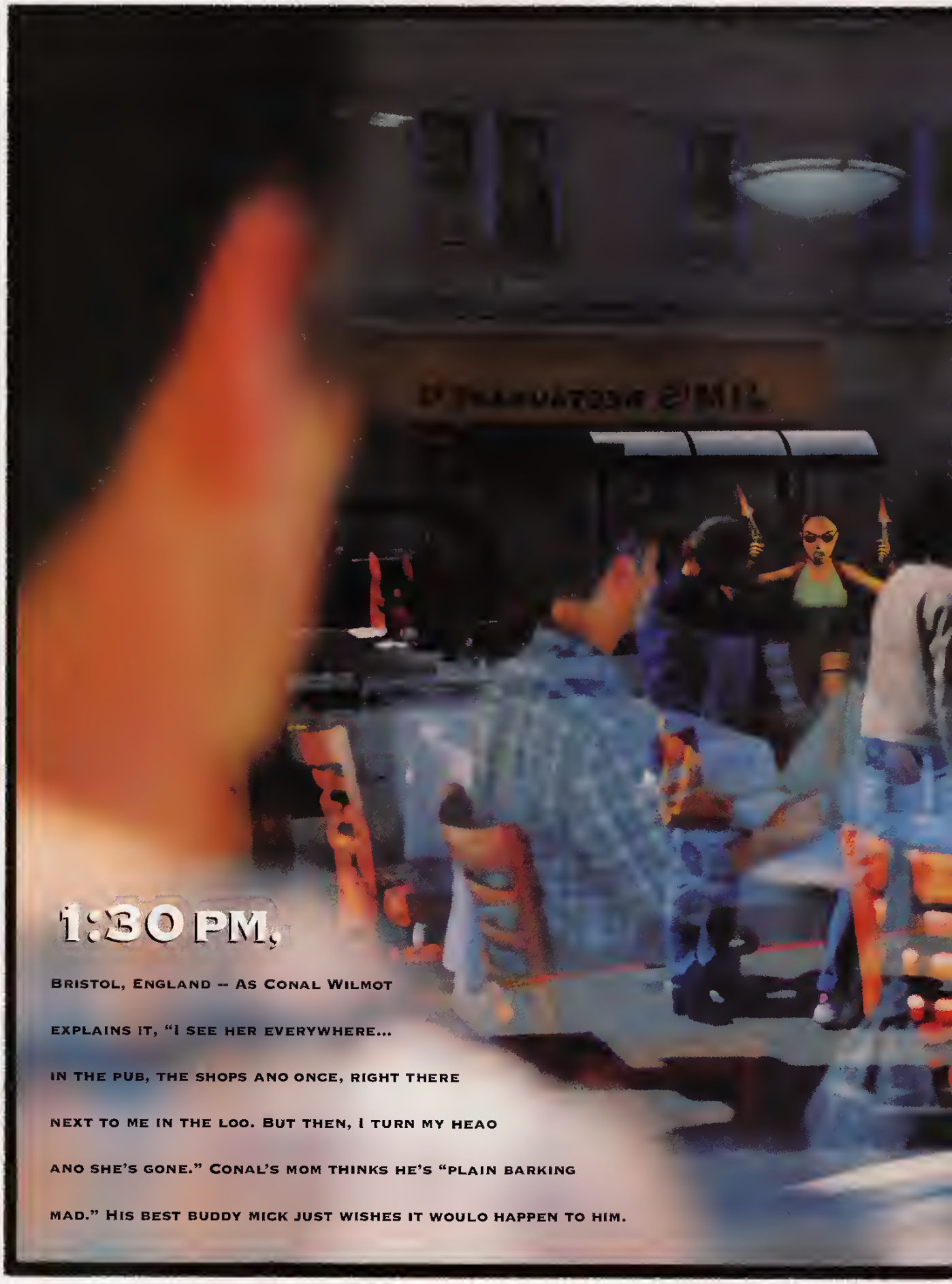


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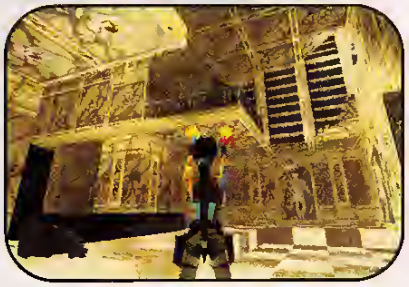
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1:30 PM,

Bristol, England -- As Conal Wilmot explains it, "I see her everywhere... in the pub, the shops and once, right there next to me in the loo. But then, I turn my head and she's gone." Conal's mom thinks he's "plain barking mad." His best buddy Mick just wishes it would happen to him.











Inset photo (above): Without warning, teo time becomes TR II time.

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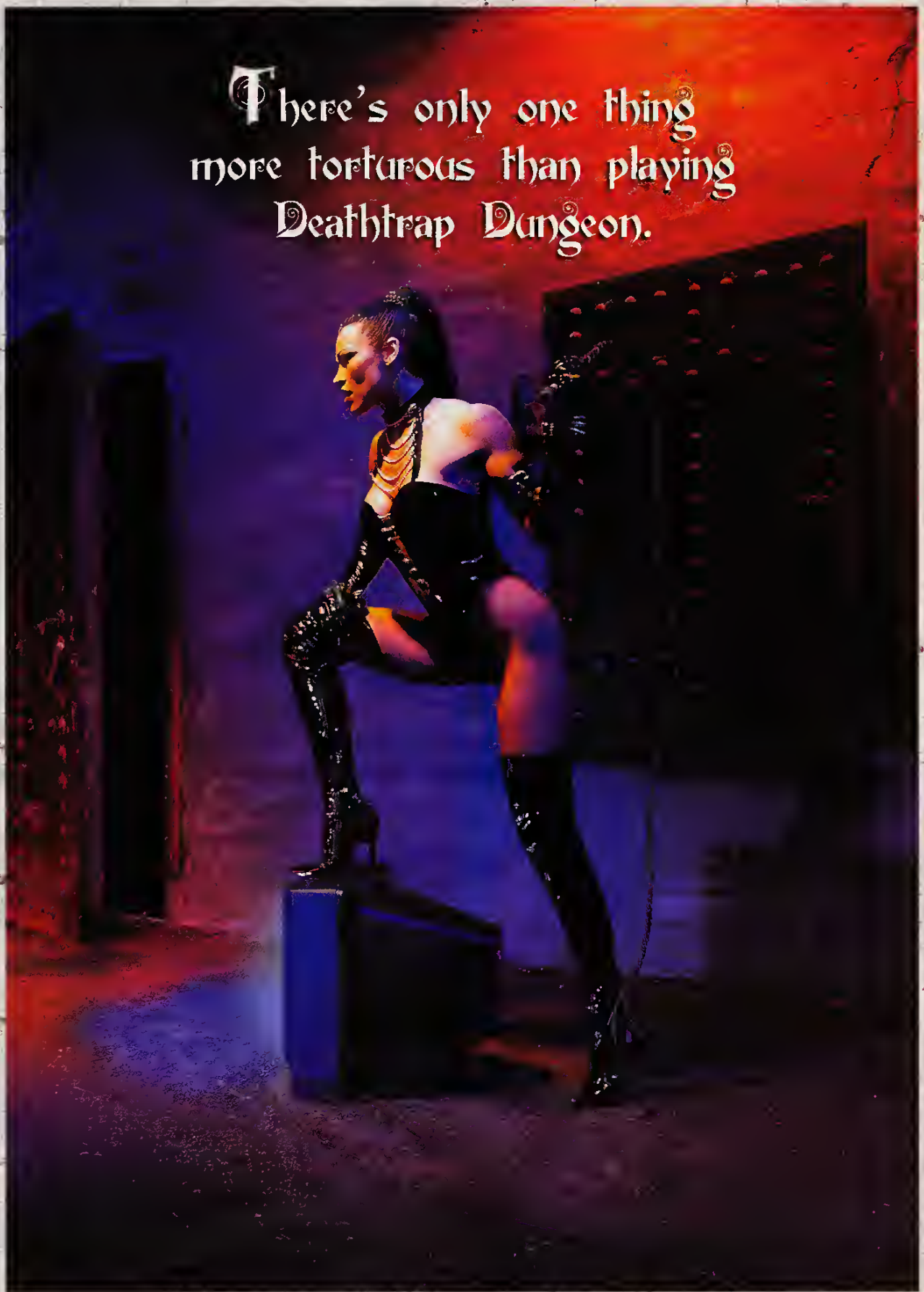
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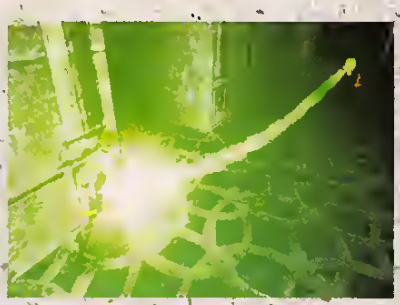


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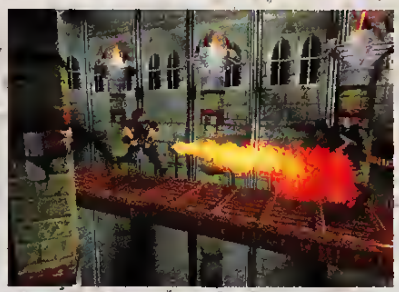
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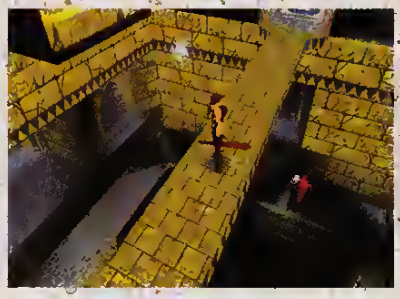
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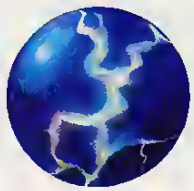
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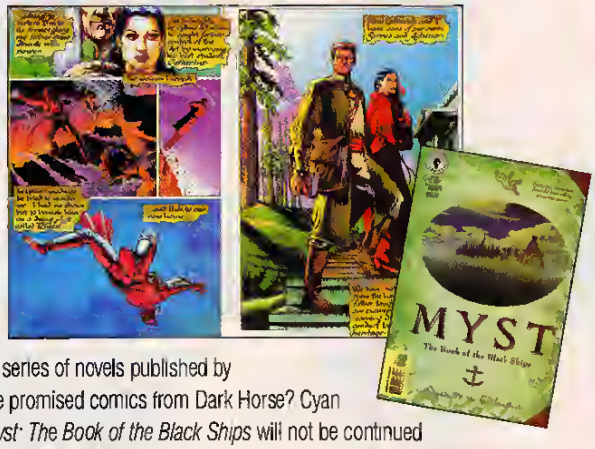
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Parallax Software

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Myst the Boat



MYST, and its sequel, RIVEN, have sold a combined total of more than 3 million copies worldwide, and have tapped into the casual gaming market in a way that no other game series has ever done. However, they have also been criticized for their lack of a detailed plot.

Cyan (Myst's developer) has instead let the story be told in a series of novels published by Hyperion Books. But what of the promised comics from Dark Horse? Cyan and Dark Horse confirm that *Myst: The Book of the Black Ships* will not be continued beyond the first issue, which was published in August. "There were communication problems between the two companies. It didn't turn out the way we expected," says Bonnie Staub, spokesperson for Cyan. Dark Horse agrees that the comic book medium isn't the best format for what Cyan was trying to accomplish.

There are no plans to approach other comic book publishers with the story, which falls chronologically between the first novel and MYST. But, says Staub, that doesn't mean more novels won't appear sometime in the future. "They made up this whole backstory for the first game so there wouldn't be any holes, and it just grew and grew," she says. "Now I think they just want to take some time off!"—*Kate Hedstrom*

Same Game, New Name

Racing fans be warned. Papyrus' recently released CART RACING—not to be confused with MICROSOFT'S CART PRECISION RACING—is actually a rerelease of 1995's INDY CAR RACING II. Papyrus was forced to rename an old product as a result of the splitting of the CART and the Indy Racing League. CART RACING does include some upgrades, however, including Rendition 3D support and a 200-page strategy guide.—*Matthew Schaefer*



THIS JUST IN

NIGHTMARE NED

Armed only with a spitfire yo yo and his own wits and cunning, a young man faces his deepest, darkest fears in Disney's NIGHTMARE NED. It's all in the spirit of fun, however. Part strategy and part arcade, the game features five nightmare worlds for young players to visit and explore. There's the graveyard, the school, the infirmary, the attic, the basement, and the bathroom. Each realm features its own brand of traps, passages, and demons. Then there are the Shadow Creatures, each of which occupies a nightmare and gradually reveals itself as its world is explored. Reveal all five creatures to win the game. —*Allen Greenberg*

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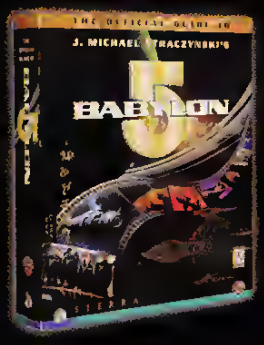
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Your Worst Nightmare

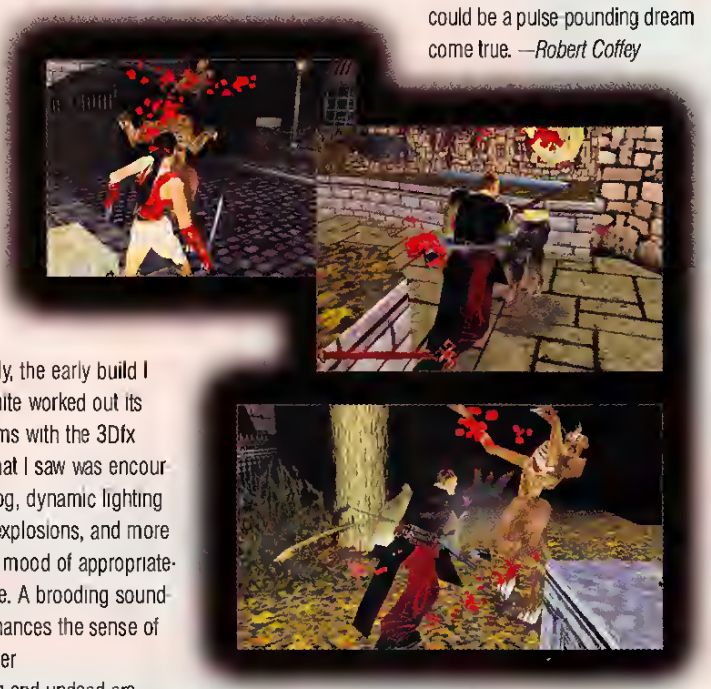
In the Works

What do you get if you combine Virtua Fighter 2, Tomb Raider, and Jack the Ripper's hometown? Probably something very much like Activision's Nightmare Creatures, a third-person action game in which gamers fight zombies, werewolves, and demons in ferocious hand-to-hand combat on the rain-slicked streets of early 19th-century London.

Nightmare Creatures wants to take full advantage of gamers' rapid adoption of 3D cards, but, unfortunately, the early build I played hadn't quite worked out its personal problems with the 3Dfx chipset. Still, what I saw was encouraging. Drifting fog, dynamic lighting effects, wicked explosions, and more all help create a mood of appropriately gothic menace. A brooding soundtrack further enhances the sense of impending danger.

Both the living and undead are rendered in Gouraud shaded, full-3D graphics. Gamers can square off against the gruesome assortment of monsters as one of two characters, a muscle-bound priest or a lithe, sword-wielding female student.

Multipoint collision detection allows gamers to lop off heads, slash creatures in half, and enjoy the happy glow that comes from blowing a demon's arms off and watching him lurch back for more. More saving opportunities would be welcome, but Nightmare Creatures looks as though it could be a pulse-pounding dream come true. —*Robert Coffey*



In Nightmare Creatures, you can play as a muscle-bound priest or a sword-wielding student to rid 19th-century England of its moestrous scourge.

THIS JUST IN

WATERWORLD

Conceived at the same time as the movie, WaterWorld's great cut-scenes use the same sets and lesser actors from Costner's saga. The music and sound effects are also good. But the interface, while solid and smooth, shows its age. The squad-level gameplay, à la Jagged Alliance, is simple and unchallenging. There is only one linear campaign of 22 scenarios, so the game has no replay value. It also has no multiplayer capability. But it does capture the rough-and-tough feel of the post-apocalyptic world, so it might appeal to fans of the movie or beginning gamers. Everybody else should stay high and dry. —*Mike Fay*

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SAND WARRIORS

This game about Egyptian hillbillies in futuristic fighter craft is buggy and crash-prone. Gameplay is weak from the first goofy cut-scene to the end of the uninspired missions. You pilot an improbable looking pseudo-Egyptian aircraft that has no aircraft feel at all. Heck, Asteroids has a better flight model. The graphics need improvement (they're bearable only at 800x600), and the AI routines are pathetic for all enemy units. The game has a stereotypical ancient Egyptian look, but everyone talks as if they're from the South or San Diego. Basically this game isn't an also ran, it's a shouldn't have ran. —*Greg Fortune*

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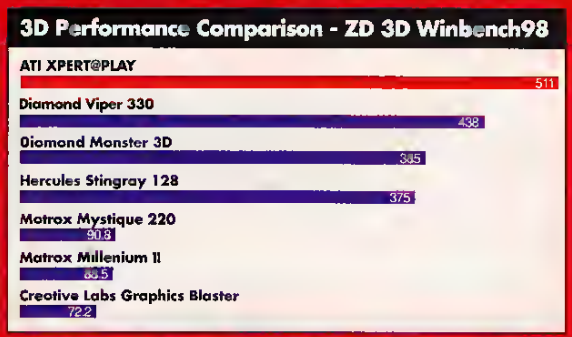
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Empire Joins the Golf Wars With a Strong Contender

Empire Interactive has devised a new way for PC golfers to whack their balls. Dubbed the MouseDrive, Empire's star creation promises a more natural, real-time alternative to the genre's traditional double- or triple-click swing meter.

In fact, Empire is so convinced that you'll love the MouseDrive, they've purposely omitted a swing meter alternative—a move they may regret if players don't take to the new swing mechanic.

To use MouseDrive, players simply pull back on the mouse for backswing, then push forward for the drive. Sideways movement on the followthrough creates hooks or slices. According to Empire, the real-time interactivity of the MouseDrive makes it possible to achieve highly technical shots, from low drives into strong winds to draws, fades, and deep bunker explosions. The free-form mechanics of MouseDrive also require the use of 12,000 frames of animation to represent more than 90 possible swing variations.

In the Works

Practice greens and an interactive tutorial hosted by Gary Player are available to help newcomers master these advanced techniques.

Two 18-hole courses ship with the game: South Carolina's Hilton Head National, and the Jack Nicklaus-designed St. Mellion International in Cornwall, England. Every inch of each course was surveyed, then height-mapped with SGI workstations. The game incorporates actual turf, trees, and hazards into the course design. The results are extremely photorealistic when viewed at 640x480 at 256 colors. The courses are further enhanced with light-source shading and detailed texture mapping.

The digitized golfers are also exceptionally well drawn. Video-captured at an incredible 200 frames per second, the onscreen animation is fluid and lifelike. Most amazing, however, is the golfers' realistic interaction with the course graphics. In most other sims, golfers stand flat footed, regardless of the terrain. In GOLF PRO, onscreen golfers strike a more realistic stance that is determined by the lay of the ball in relation to turf inclines or proximity to course obstacles. For example, a ball played on the edge of a steep bunker might require that the golfer stand with one leg higher and knee bent. This is one of those small details that you never miss until you see it implemented for the first time.

Game styles include match, stroke, and tournament play, with a progressive handicapping system that automatically adjusts as your play improves. Though it's not clear from the prerelease information, Empire hints that you can also compete with professionals such as Player, Nicklaus, and Tom Watson in recorded play from actual tournaments. Other features not available for preview include a 5,000 word shot-by-shot commentary, and "Play with the Pro," an interactive analysis of your golfing techniques, coached by Player. Multiplayer games support up to eight players via modem, network, or play-by-email.

It should be interesting to see if sim-golfers embrace Empire's MouseDrive. Even without such innovation, THE GOLF PRO looks to be another strong contender in this red-hot sports genre. —*Scott May*





RODENT POWER Empire is so confident you'll love its new MouseDrive swing mechanic, THE GOLF PRO doesn't even offer a traditional alternative. The game also features stunning high-resolution SGI-rendered graphics and multiplay for up to eight players via modem or network connection.

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Developer: Blizzard North • **Publisher:** Blizzard • **Target Release Date:** Winter 1997–98

SPEAK OF THE DEVIL



by Elliott Chin

DIA

DIABLO's gothic images of perdition masterfully condemned gamers to its dark, rich mythological world. They gladly "sold their souls" to the tune of more than a million copies. We editors even named it *Computer Gaming World*'s 1996 Game of the Year.

Yet, there were those who weighed this rare game in the balance and found it wanting. Some claimed it to be a dumbed-down role-playing game. Others dismissed it as a mere sophisticated action game, a new ROGUE or GAUNTLET. Though it reinvigorated the role-playing market, many criticized it for not being a true RPG. Others objected to Blizzard's lack of foresight regarding cheating on battle.net.

To the multiplayer fans, Blizzard has promised to fix the cheating problem in DIABLO II. To those who complain about DIABLO's lack of RPG purity, the design team offers no quarter. Says Blizzard's David Brevik, "We didn't make an RPG, we made DIABLO."

For the sequel, the Blizzard team hopes to keep DIABLO's fun hack-and-slash experience while expanding and improving the game. They don't want to appease hard-core RPG fans by adding artificial NPC interactions—they want to maintain the flavor of the original—but they also don't want DIABLO II to be just more of the same.

After talking to the Blizzard team, it's clear that they're determined to create a more immersive

Rogues' Gallery
CORRUPTED ROGUE

BLO'S BACK

AND HE'S MAD AS HELL! Get the Scoop on His Next Reign of Terror

experience with new characters, monsters, spells, and locations while producing a true sequel with a twist.

Diabolical Plan

The twist is that the story is told and experienced from a new hero's perspective. None of the heroes from DIABLO return, and at the start of the game, even Diablo's whereabouts are unknown.

The hero from the first game, after containing Diablo's spirit and journeying to the East, succumbed to the more powerful will of the Lord of Terror. Now, Diablo is free from his entrapment below Tristram and has assumed his original appearance, but with much greater power. As the game begins, he is somewhere in the East, raising an army to conquer not just one city, but a whole game world.





INTO THE DARKNESS Blizzard is striving to increase realism with improved lighting effects and visibility based on line of sight. Although these early dungeons resemble those in DIABLO, later environments will be more diverse. In addition to more detailed environments, the game's mechanics will be improved with true point-and-click movement.

Building Character

There are no rogues, warriors, or sorcerers to play in DIABLO II. The Lord of Terror is mightier than ever, and the previous game's heroes simply aren't up to the challenge. So Blizzard has created five new character classes. One, the Amazon, is a cross between the rogue and warrior, with superior melee and range attacks. Her main attacks make use of either the bow or spear. She will have five levels of abilities, each more powerful than the last. You can see some of the proposed abilities in the box below. These aren't all of her abilities, and in fact, she won't be able to learn all of them. You'll have to pick from among the total number, meaning that gamers will be able to customize unique characters. You might specialize in the spear, while your friend specializes in the bow. For other characters' abilities, see the sidebar on page 81.

The Amazon's Special Abilities

1	Vital shot (bow)	Slower but more damaging shot
	Jab (spear)	Faster, but slightly less powerful attack
2	True aim (bow)	More accurate, but slower shot
	Guided (spear)	Temporarily homing in target
3	Safe shot (bow)	Fire into melee without hitting friends
	Pindl (spear)	Less accurate bit, knocks target back
4	Dodge	Instantly dodge an attack
	Impale (spear)	Triple damage but chance of destroying spear



The action in DIABLO II proceeds through four acts, with each act comprising a town and its accompanying dungeons. Each act will also tell a little more about Diablo's origins and plans, which include freeing his brothers, Baal and Mephisto. (Together they form the triumvirate known as the Prime Evils.) As the game's hero, you will have to track Diablo through each act and town and try to prevent him from raising his army.

Your hero comes into the game as a powerful adventurer who has heard of the Lord of Terror's renewed rampage. No one from the original DIABLO can help you. Since the heroes of the first game were too weak to defeat DIABLO completely, the sequel calls for all-new adventurers.

As a character from one of five new classes, you start out in the mountains at the Sisters of the Sightless Eye monastery. DIABLO fans will recall that the rogue character belonged to the Sisters order. Blizzard envisions new players beginning the game here, where they'll discover that the monastery has been taken over by a tremendous evil power. The Lesser Evil Andariel, a demon from Hell, is hoping to curry favor with Diablo by conscripting the rogues into her evil army.

Andariel soon corrupts all the captured rogues, but a small band of survivors forms around the monastery, creating a makeshift camp and DIABLO II's first town.

You'll need to uncover Andariel's hand in the fall of the monastery and free the Sisters. When you defeat Andariel in the town's final dungeon level, you'll move on to subsequent acts and locales in the East.

Will It Be a True RPG?

One of *CGW*'s criticisms of DIABLO was that the town and nonplayer characters (NPCs) seemed too artificial and static: The streams never moved in Tristram, the NPCs were nailed to the floor; they "gave" you items by hurling them to the ground; and there were no ambient noises or background action. In addition, the role-playing experiences for each character class weren't very distinct.

Although Brevik says that Blizzard never set out to make DIABLO a hardcore role-playing game, they do want to make DIABLO II a better role-playing *experience*. The development team recognizes that the characters in the original game were too much alike, distinguished only by their weapons and character attributes. In light of this, the team is endeavoring to strengthen the game's RPG qualities in three ways: They want to make the towns more alive, integrate the NPCs further into the quests and story, and make the playing experience for each character class very different.

To make the towns more realistic, the Blizzard team plans to add plenty of animation, including moving water in streams, occasional flocks of birds, and NPCs walking in the background. Each town will have a unique cast of supporting NPCs, and these NPCs will have a wider range of motions. You'll see them moving about,



Rogues' Gallery

ANDARIEL The most powerful of the Lesser Evils, Andariel hopes to gain the Dark Lord's favor by enslaving the monastery residents and making them her army.



Hell's Kitchen

We caught up with David Brevik, the president of Blizzard North, to ask about the changes coming to DIABLO II. Here, we've excerpted a few questions from our interview. But if you want to hear more from Brevik—including his thoughts on DIABLO's place as a "real" RPG, nonhuman characters in DIABLO II, and cheating—read the full interview at www.computergaming.com.

CGW: How is DIABLO II different from the first game?

Brevik: DIABLO II is a ground-up reinvention of DIABLO. From a technical standpoint, we have restructured the game to run more efficiently, with better lighting and special effects. And, of course, we've addressed the cheating issue. From a gameplay standpoint,

we have made the Diablo universe much larger, with more varied experiences for the players. We want the players to feel totally immersed in the world of Diablo, which means more varied tasks, more interesting NPCs, smarter foes, and more options for the player.

CGW: Will you meet any rogues, sorcerers, or warriors in Diablo II?

Brevik: Players will encounter rogues, sorcerers, and warriors during the game as NPCs and hired characters.

CGW: Why is Blizzard North remaking everything—from character classes to monsters—in Diablo II?

Brevik: We wanted to give players an all-new experience. We will keep a few of the monsters, such as skeletons and zombies, in some form, but they will have new AI, abilities, and weapons. I would say players can expect to see maybe 5 or 10 percent of the monsters from Diablo....In regard to spells, we will keep probably about 10 percent of the spells. Some, like town portal, we'll keep out of necessity; others, like lightning, we'll keep because everyone liked them.



Rogues' Gallery

BIGHEAD These monsters hurl balls of lightning from their eyes and mouths. Their placeholder names will change before the final release of Diablo II.

acting like real people, doing things that you'd expect of them. That means the blacksmith could come out of his shop periodically to greet you (unfortunately, Blizzard doesn't plan to allow entry into buildings). I've been assured that when NPCs give you an item, they'll hand it to you, just as a person in real life would.

NPCs will also have a larger role in the game. You won't go to them only when you need healing or some new items. Instead, you'll be able to learn spells and special fighting abilities from them, probably in exchange for the completion of a quest. They'll also be more useful in providing background for the game's story.

The most exciting NPC development is that you will be able to hire NPCs to join you on your adventures. They won't follow you through the entire game, but they will accompany you temporarily, perhaps through one act. You will be able to hire only one NPC at a time, and they'll have their own personalities and agenda. You won't control them, but they will fight on your behalf. Some NPCs will join you simply for money; others might join if you complete a certain quest. The Blizzard team is varying the NPCs and their backgrounds, and assures that those who join you will fit into the quest and story structure of the game.

Finally, although Diablo II will be an all-new game, some of your favorite NPCs will return. At this point, Deckard Cain and Wirt are slated for cameos.

Just Questing

For the actual quests, the Blizzard team is creating more special-location quests, similar to the *Bone Chamber*, *Poisoned Water Supply*, and *King Leoric's Tomb* in Diablo. That means more quests will be in separate locations, accessible through the dungeon yet taking place in self-contained environments.

And since the sequel contains four towns instead of Diablo's one, you can expect a lot more quests. Quests will not change depending on your character class, but they will still be randomized. How you acquire quests won't be very different, but Blizzard says they'll be better integrated into the story and your character's development. Completed quests in Diablo II will reveal more of the back-story, free NPCs to join your party, *or* allow you to learn new fighting techniques.

All the quests will be available in both single- and multiplayer games. The idea is to allow multiple gamers to play through the entire game together.

The folks at Blizzard showed us four of the proposed quests for the first act. Two of these, the *Den of Evil* and the *Forgotten Tower*, involve rooting out infested buildings and questing for treasure. The other two, *Field of Stones* and *Sisters' Burial Ground*, deal more with the act's main storyline. In *Field of Stones*, you'll have to revive a defunct circle of mystic stones, which ancient



A NEW LOOK You can see how the interface has changed in Diablo II, which will have a larger game view and no status bar.

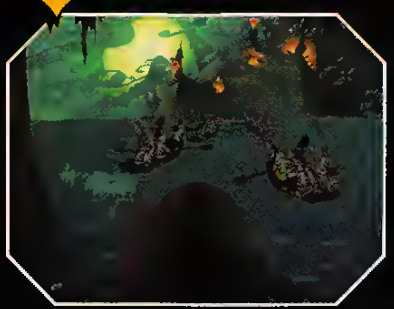
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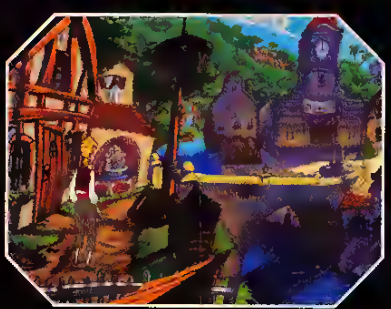


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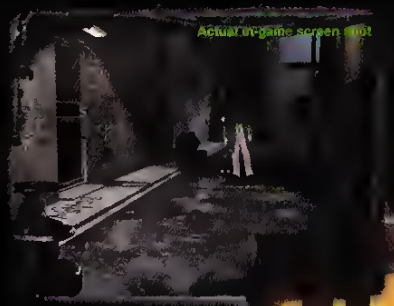
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Rogues' Gallery
GORGON

mages once used to teleport to far-off realms Restoring the stones could give you the ability to visit Tristram or enlist the aid of Deckard Cain, the storyteller from DIABLO. In the *Sisters Burial Ground* quest, you'll go to the monastery's burial grounds, where you'll find that dead rogues have been resurrected by Andariel's magic

Going to Town

DIABLO II will boast a far greater scope than DIABLO. This time, you're questing to save an entire world, not just a town. Each of DIABLO II's four towns will have one main dungeon, several subdungeons, and a surrounding wilderness area that can be fully explored. And, according to codesigner Eric Schaefer, each town will have as much gameplay as all of DIABLO.

Towns will be arrayed in linear fashion, meaning that you'll have to finish one town before you can move on to the next. But, once you finish clearing a town, you can return to it later Certain quests will span several towns, requiring you to travel back and forth, probably by caravan or teleport.

Multiplayer Changes

DIABLO was named the 1996 Game of the Year in part because of its seamless Internet play and multiplayer support. While the multiplay was good, it was overshadowed by incessant cheating.

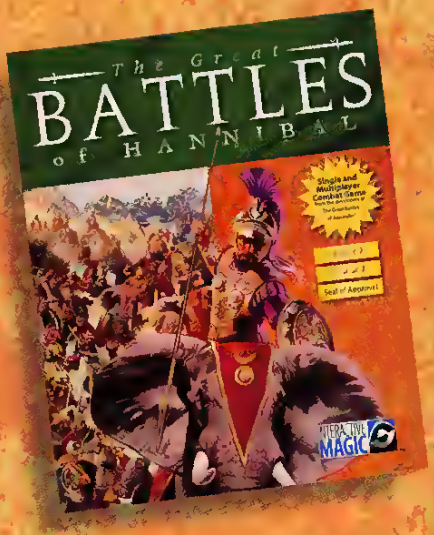
Blizzard says it is committed to addressing the problem, and codesigner Eric Schaefer promises, "We will solve the cheating." Schaefer won't reveal details though, partly because the team is still working on solutions and partly because they don't want to give away their plans to prospective cheaters.

Blizzard says it will increase the maximum number of players, possibly up to eight. Most important, the entire game will be available in multiplayer games. Every quest will be playable in single- and multiplayer modes. Difficulty levels will be taken out of the multiplayer game. Since each successive town gets progressively harder, Blizzard sees no need to add difficulty levels.



Rogues' Gallery
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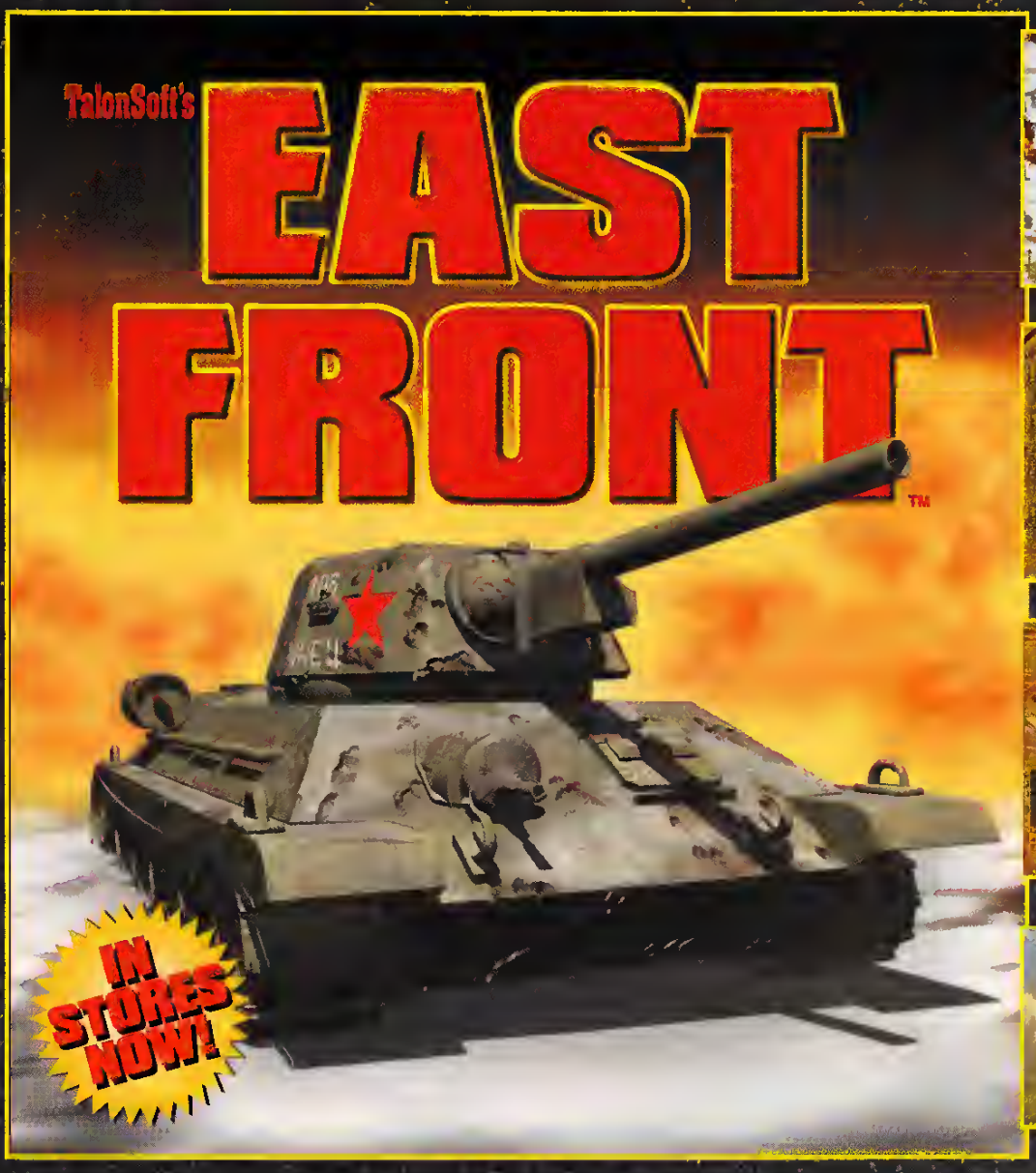
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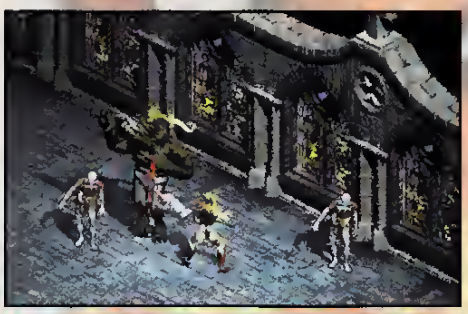
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Although Blizzard is being coy about the three other towns, they will say that each has a unique flavor and environment. One act will take place in the desert, possibly in a Horadrim town, with a few resident sorcerers. Another act will take place in a jungle environment.

Each town will also have a powerful end boss. Andariel will be the main villain in the monastery town and Diablo will be the final boss, but who are the other two? Blizzard wants that to be a surprise.



BACK IN ACTION Diablo II promises many new features, including all-new nasties like this beast, which Blizzard calls "Bighead."

Fantastic Five

Like the settings, the character classes will be more diverse this time around. There will now be five classes—two spell-casters, two fighters, and one hybrid—and each will play differently. The attributes list will stay the same, but combat will change. While spell-casters will have a melee weapon and a range of spells, fighters will have a repertoire of fighting moves that will rival the mage spells for diversity. These moves will, in effect, replace spells for these melee characters. (The fighters will be able to cast a few spells, but only through the use of scrolls or staves.) The hybrid class should have a mix of spells and fighting moves.

By giving each class a wide range of fighting abilities and spells that no other class can use, Blizzard hopes to make the playing experience for each character different. Each class will also be customizable, because not every player will be able to master the fighting moves of every class. Two players could thus create characters of the same class but with very different fighting abilities (see the two character sidebars, pages 69 and 81).

Diablo II will also boast a host of new spells and monsters. Only a few monsters from Diablo will be back, and each town will have its own mix of monsters.

Altered States

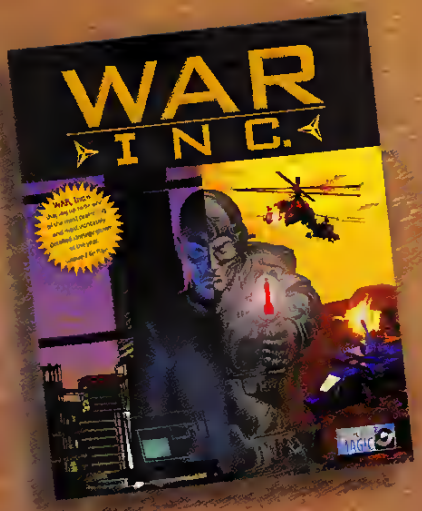
Aside from making high-concept changes, Blizzard's development team is also overhauling the engine and interface. The new engine is already running, and it looks better than the original. There was some talk of a new 3D engine, but that was scrapped in favor of the more familiar 2D engine. While the perspective remains the



Rogues' Gallery

FAMILIAR FACES The Skeleton, the Fallen One, and the Zombie are three more that return from Diablo.

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Character Class Spells and Abilities

Here's a sampling of the new spells that some classes will possess.

Whirlwind: Wind attack that strikes all squares around character
Zealotry: Lowers speed, but boosts attack strength and hit points
Enchant: Makes target sword flame, and makes other weapons magical
Glacial Spike: A cold spike that freezes target
Summon Blood Golem: Blood golem fights to the death for you
Wall of Bone: An impassable wall with tough hit points
Control Monster: Temporarily turns a monster into an ally

same, the graphics are now much cleaner and more detailed. The lighting will be blended better for more realistic shadows. Also, the environment is being enlarged. You'll remember that the walls and doors in DIABLO were only slightly taller than your characters, but in DIABLO II the walls will loom, giving the entire dungeon a more foreboding appearance. Blizzard has also implemented true transparencies (rather than dithering) when a character walks behind a wall.

Characters will now enjoy true line-of-sight. Only the objects in the character's direct line of sight will be visible. No more seeing through doors or walls, even if they are directly in front of you.

Blizzard says that dungeons will be more interactive, with more traps and breakable objects, including stained glass windows. The graphics will also shift away from being tile-based, to give you true point-and-click freedom of movement (in contrast to DIABLO's eight directions of movement). Blizzard has also heard gamers' cries and will add a "Run" feature to your character's movement options.

Hell to Raise

There are still some things that Blizzard is keeping secret. Of course, this early in the development cycle, there is much that still hasn't been finalized. As more details are revealed, we'll bring you updates. For now, the Blizzard team is working hard on the first act, and promises that each successive act will only get better. They're also mindful of the shipping pains of DIABLO and have built in plenty of months for play-testing. At this point, they've got great ideas and an impressive-looking engine and first dungeon. The rest remains to be seen, but the folks at Blizzard have never let us down before. I doubt they'll start with DIABLO II



Rogues' Gallery

OUR MYSTERY GUEST: The cherubic demon and gangly devil are anything but angelic. Blizzard says they are powerful evil entities. Will you face them as town end bosses or something even more sinister?

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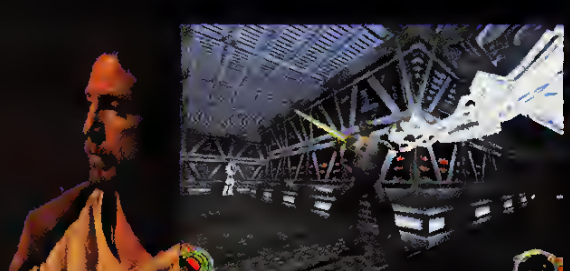
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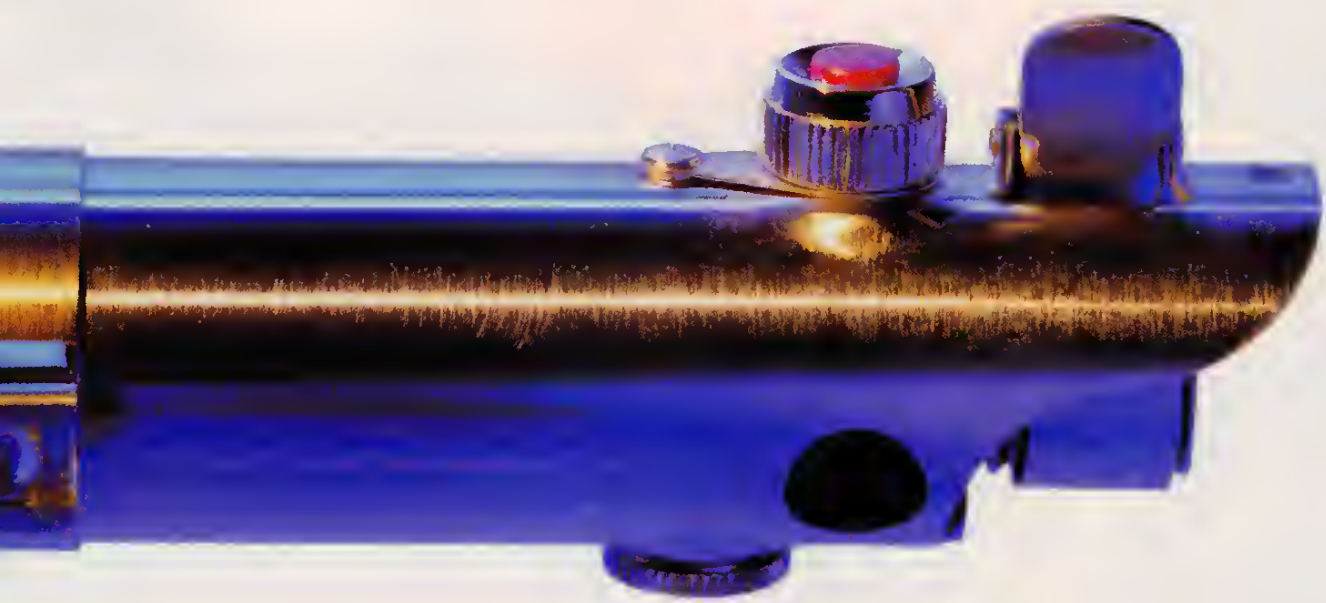






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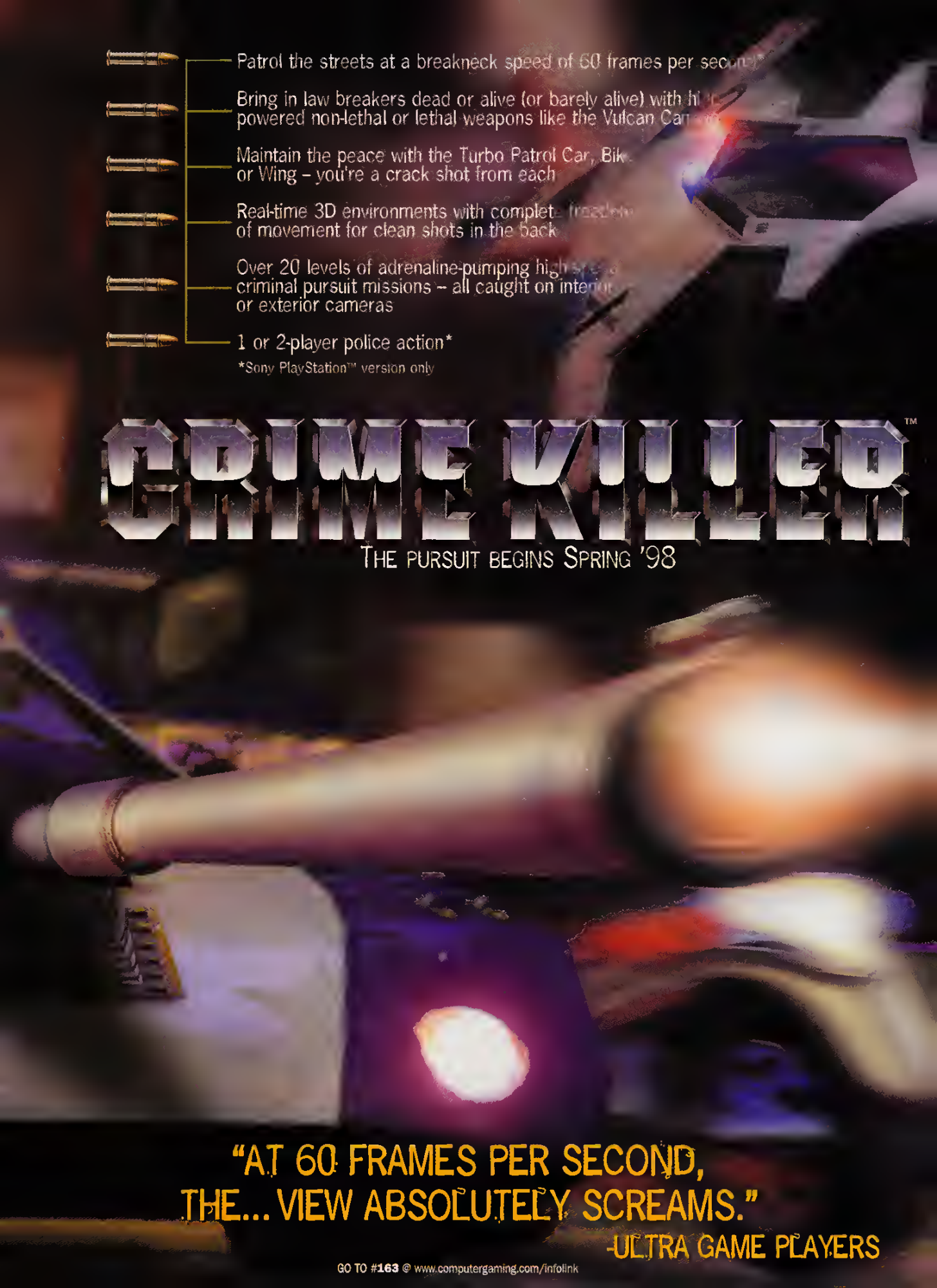
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Pluton Powered PCs

Big Budget, Low Budget, or No Budget—Here's What You Need to Build a Gaming Dynamo

The Ultimate Game Machine, Part III



by Loyd Case

Technology is the supercharged element of computer gaming. Two years ago, *CGW*'s first "Ultimate Game Machine" was a Pentium 133MHz, and the Pentium 166 was just around the corner. This year's UGM has more than twice the clock speed and fast, beautiful graphics—the kind that could only be seen on workstations two years ago. Not only that, but today we can build a budget system that nearly doubles the performance of that 1995 Ultimate System for less than half the price. Clearly, our kind of heavy metal has a one-year half-life.

That being the case, we offer this series for those who need to make changes to keep up with the latest game releases. Our goal for this year's build your-own segment was fourfold. First, we wanted to build the ultimate game machine with money being no object. Hey, this is a gaming magazine, so why not have some fun? Second, we wanted to build a screamer box for a price point of $2,500 (we do, after all, live in the real world). Third, we wanted to offer a low budget alternative with respectable performance for less than $1,500. Finally, for those who don't want or need to build a new system, we wanted to offer upgrade strategies to improve your components.

You may not agree with all of our selections. Even so, they are best-of-breed components—and they would be good candidates for upgrading any system. Still, let us know what your favorite choices are, because we'll be updating the Ultimate Game Machine components each month online. Let's get nuclear...

Imagine, for a moment, that you had deep pockets, and could indulge your every whim in building a thermonuclear gaming rig. What would it look like?

We like to keep the perspective on gaming. For example, several people suggested that we pick the Fujitsu Plasmavision 42-inch, flat-panel display. We considered it, but there are problems with flat-panel displays for gaming. For one thing, switching resolutions tends to result in either shrunken or ugly images. This is, after all, the Ultimate *Game* Machine, not the ultimate workstation or the ultimate home theater.



STILL THE ONE Though AMD and Cyrix are working on improving their floating-point performance, the Pentium II remains the champion of the day

The Core

There are six components that make up the core of a PC: the processor, the motherboard, the memory, the case and power supply, the CD-ROM drive, and the floppy drive. We'll give you a quick update on developments in each area, and then explain our choices. For the purposes of this article, we'll call the high-end system the Meltdown and the midrange system Heavy Metal. (The $1,500 system follows in a sidebar on page 112.)

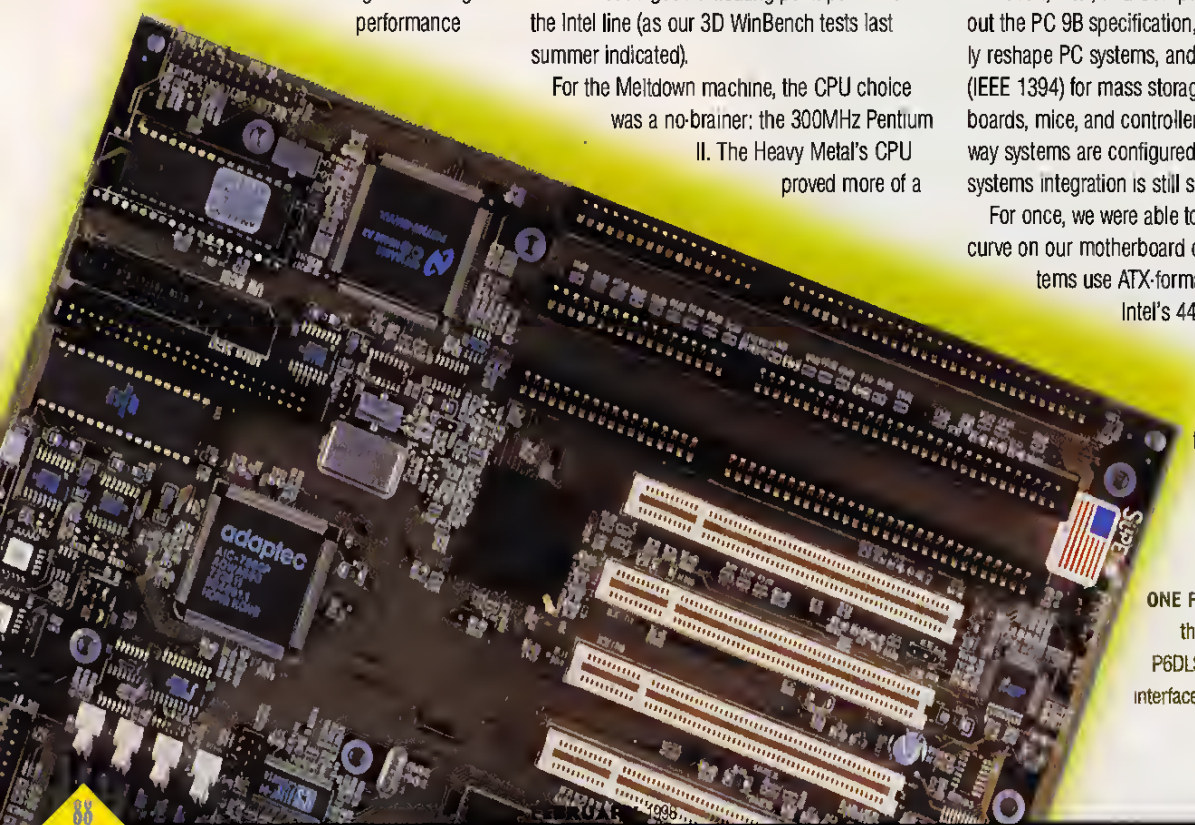
Processor In the last few months, we took a look at a lot of CPU alternatives. Cyrix was out, even on the budget box. It just didn't deliver the goods for high-performance gaming. There's a myth that having a fast 3D accelerator neutralizes the Pentium II's floating-point advantage, but it's just that, a myth. You still need to generate the polygons and do the lighting transforms and the geometry—and that takes serious floating-point performance. AMD was a more interesting choice, but we didn't have a chance to look at one of the new VIA-equipped AGP Socket 7 motherboards, so it's also out. The AMD chip is more of a consideration if your budget is very, very tight, although it's still not as good a floating-point performer as the Intel line (as our 3D WinBench tests last summer indicated).

For the Meltdown machine, the CPU choice was a no-brainer: the 300MHz Pentium II. The Heavy Metal's CPU proved more of a dilemma. Luckily, we were able to take advantage of some lowered prices, so the Heavy Metal is still a Pentium II, but at 233MHz

Motherboard Motherboards are a critical part of any system. Low-ball motherboards can actually hurt system performance—or result in flaky behavior. Nothing ruins an immersive experience more than getting dumped out of the game with a "blue screen o' death" error.

Motherboard technology is rapidly evolving. Microsoft, Intel, and Compaq are busy getting out the PC 98 specification, which will completely reshape PC systems, and the use of FireWire (IEEE 1394) for mass storage and USB for keyboards, mice, and controllers will reshape the way systems are configured. Until then, though, systems integration is still something of a puzzle.

For once, we were able to ride the technology curve on our motherboard choices. Both systems use ATX-format, AGP boards using Intel's 440LX chipset. When moving to ATX format motherboards, you'll have the ability to shut down your



ONE FAST MOTHER: Board, that is. The Supermicro P6DLS' second Slot 1 CPU interface leaves your machine with room to grow.

whole system from Windows. Although it cuts the slot count to seven, ATX has pretty much become the standard. It offers better cooling and good support for full-sized expansion cards. The new LX chipset is somewhat faster than the older 440FX chipset, and it supports SDRAM and UltraDMA/33 hard drives.

The Meltdown uses Supermicro's P6DLS mainboard, which is actually a dual-processor board, but we used just a single CPU, since Windows 95 can use only one processor. However, when NT 5.0 ships, with full DirectX and multiprocessor support, we can add a second CPU. The Supermicro board is a little rough around the edges—documentation is pretty skimpy—but it's kind of like the difference between a Dodge Viper and a Mustang 5.0 liter. We know which one's faster.

The Heavy Metal uses the very nice, easy to set up, ASUS P2L97 AGP motherboard. This puppy has one AGP slot, five PCI slots (yes *five*), and a pair of ISA slots (one ISA/PCI pair is shared). The Pentium II slides neatly into the Slot 1 socket on the board. Early versions of this board had the ability to set the CPU clock in the BIOS, but alas, the new versions have returned to jumpers for speed setting. One minor downside to this board is that the location of the connector strip for the power switch and reset button prevents you from installing a long ISA card in the last slot, defeating (in part) the advantage of the ATX format.

Memory One surprise you'll run into when configuring memory is that the form factor is changing once again. All of the new motherboards we looked at had *only* DIMM sockets. All those 72-pin SIMMs you've invested in can now be used to mark your place in the 688(i) manual. Most DIMMs these days are SDRAM, although you can find EDO DIMMs. Unless you have a burning need for parity modules, SDRAM seems to be the way to go. We've heard rumors of parity SDRAM, but haven't seen it yet. As for ECC (error-correcting) memory modules, don't bother unless you're doing something mission critical. ECC actually results in a minor performance hit.

The rule of thumb for memory is this: Get what you can afford. Since we didn't have a budget for the Meltdown, we dropped in 64MB of Crucial Technologies 10 nanosecond (ns) SDRAM—more than enough memory for just about any gaming need today. The 10ns speed of the SDRAM isn't fully used by the 440LX chipset, which still only runs a 66MHz system clock. Sometime in early- to mid-1998, expect to see systems with 100MHz system clocks as a matter of course.

The Heavy Metal uses a single 32MB SDRAM DIMM, leaving two empty slots for future memory expansion.

If *One* CPU Is Good...



POINT OF FACT Windows 95 can support only a single CPU, but DirectX is also migrating to Windows NT, which supports multiple CPUs; it can't hurt to have an extra slot

Many people are thinking about multiprocessing these days. In fact, this year's Ultimate Game Machine has a dual CPU motherboard, although it uses only a single CPU (for the time being).

Windows 95 is part of the problem. Windows 95 (and Windows 98, for that matter) will support only a single CPU. Adding another one would be a waste. However, DirectX 6.0 will be fully integrated into Windows NT 5.0, and NT has supported multiprocessing for several revisions now—the thought of a pair of 300MHz processors has our mouths watering in the most Pavlovian sense.

But there's a downside to using any version of NT: Older Win 95 games may not run, even with DirectX support, and DOS games almost certainly won't run. For the most obsessive gamer, the solution is to have a dual-boot NT 5.0/Windows 98 setup. This will probably be the hot ticket for the high-end gamer by the end of '98. After all, it's only disk space.

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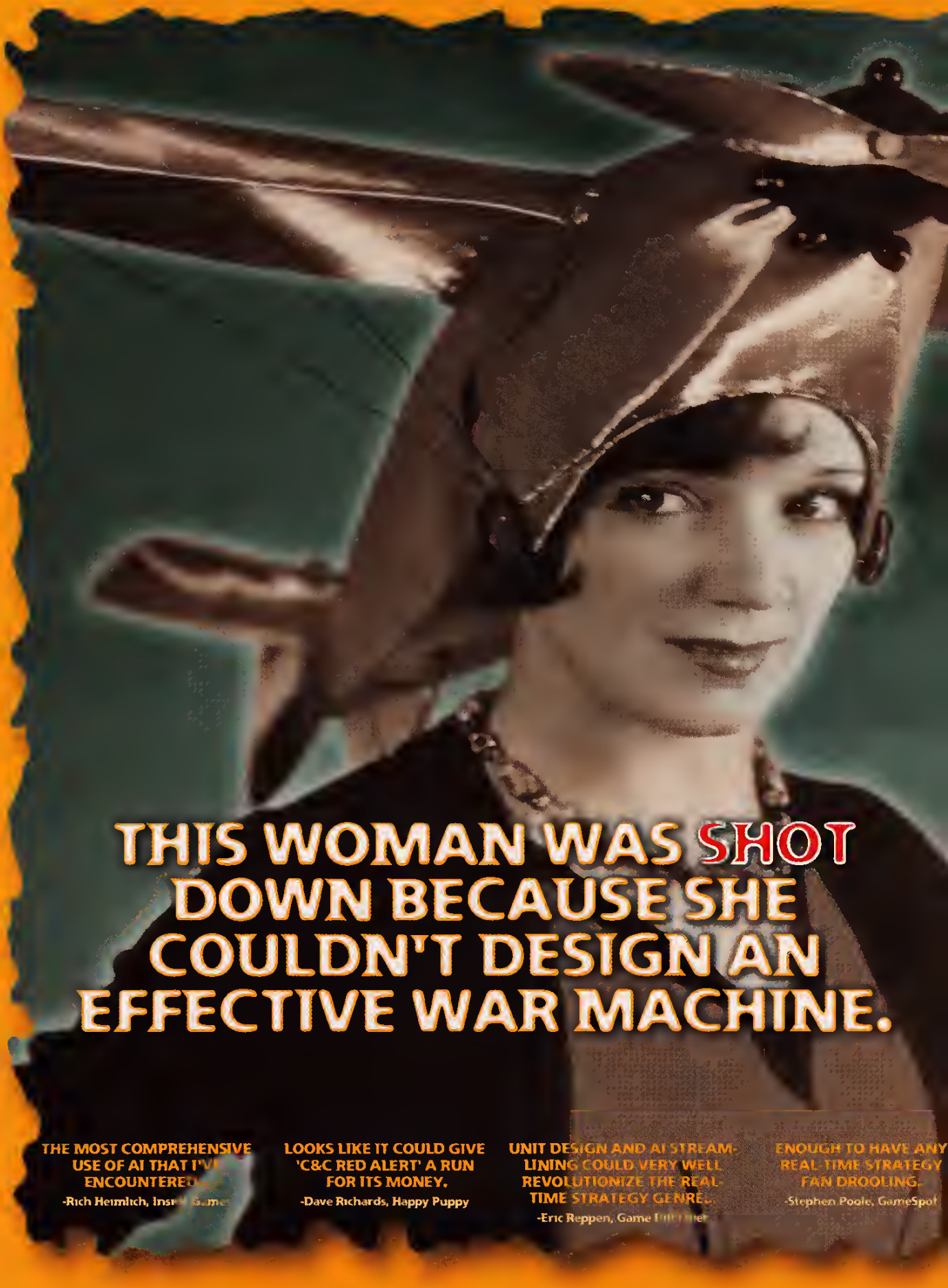
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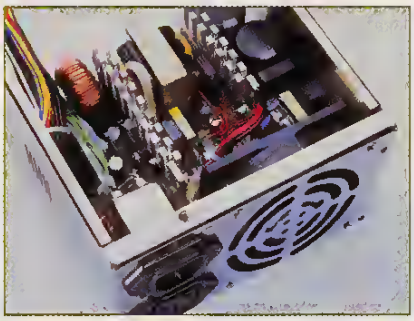
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Case and Power Supply The power supply is PC Power & Cooling's Turbocool 300 ATX, which delivers rock-solid power and reliably high current-loads. The Meltdown's case comes from the folks at JDR Microdevices. About an inch taller than last year's case, it has the removable motherboard tray and lots of internal expansion. It also has slots to install a muffin fan



MORE POWER, SCOTTY Be sure your power supply is rated to at least 230 watts

that can blow air across the hard drive—essential cooling for the drives we chose.

We found a case/power supply combo for the Heavy Metal at a local clone shop for only $79. It has a 230-watt power supply and a slide-out motherboard tray. It's even slightly larger than most midsize towers. The shop couldn't tell us the manufacturer, but these kinds of cases are widely available; we recommend you get an ATX case with at least 230 watts of power.

CD-ROM Drives At the high end, once again, there's no contest. Plextor is now shipping a 32x CAV CD-ROM drive with an ultra-SCSI

Continued on page 98



PLEX YOUR GAMING MUSCLE Plextor comes out on top again here with its 32x CAV CD-ROM

Hard Drive: Speed Without Compromise

For the Meltdown, we wanted speed without compromise. The obvious choice here was Seagate's Cheetah 10,000RPM, Ultra-Wide SCSI hard drive. It then occurred to us that if one Cheetah is good, two must be better. Scouting around, we came across Mylex's Flashpoint DW, which is an Ultra-Wide, dual-channel, SCSI host adapter with built in support for RAID 0 and RAID 1. RAID 1 is of no interest for gaming—who needs redundant data storage for LONGBOW 2? But if you've ever waited for iF-22 to load, a speedy hard drive seems less of a luxury and more of a necessity. So we used the Flashpoint host adapter and a pair of 4.5GB Cheetahs to create a single RAID 0 volume, which stripes data across two drives (in 64KB increments, in our case). In effect, you're using two drives as a single drive, doubling the width of the data path. It doesn't really double throughput, but it does speed things up a lot. For example, a single Cheetah gets around 1,700 on WinBench 97's Business Disk WinMark, whereas the dual Cheetahs configured as a RAID 0 device punch the result to a shade over 2,000. Two Cheetahs run a tad warm. Okay, they're hotter than a nuclear rod—but that's why we have a case that has a cooling fan blowing right across the hard-drive slots. Another downside is that if one drive fails, you lose everything.



RAID ON Mylex's DW (top right), part of its Flashpoint family, allows you to stripe multiple drives as a single volume

The hard drive for the Heavy Metal is slightly more conservative: Seagate's new 7,200RPM UltraDMA/33. This baby is backward compatible with EIDE, but the 7,200RPM rotational speed really kicks in with UltraDMA/33's 33MB/sec burst-transfer rate. It also sports an access time of under 10ms. With a whopping 6.4GB of storage, it's no slouch in the capacity department, either. It uses technologies such as magnetoresistive heads to cram data into as few platters as possible. You gotta love that.



SPIN CITY Seagate's latest 6.4GB UltraDMA/33 drive will also keep things moving...

How We Tested

This year, we tested the roll-your-own systems in much the same way that we tested the off-the shelf systems. These tests included Win8ench 97, 3D WinBench 97, CBench, and a slew of games. To test 3D performance, we used Flight Simulator 98, GL Quake, Wipeout XL and Moto Racer. We tested Windows DirectDraw performance by running WinQuake with the -nowindirect option. For DOS games, we used Quake and Duke Nukem 3D.

We enabled Flight Simulator 98's frame-rate counter by pressing the Shift key and the letter Z twice in succession (Shift-ZZ). We captured the frame rate at the start of the built-in FS98 features video, but it's best to watch the whole playback. FS98 is finicky about MIP-mapping, so you can see all kinds of interesting behavior with some cards. You can enable Wipeout XL's frame-rate counter by typing

CG LABS

Benchmark Tests

	Business Graphics WinMark 1024x768x16	Business Graphics WinMark 800x600x24	3D WinBench
	Graphics WinMarks	Graphics WinMarks	3D WinMarks
Falcon Northwest Mach V [1]	150	155	266
CGW Meltdown Machine	128	131	259
Dell XPS D233 [2]	97	97	199
CGW Heavy Metal Rig	107	108	206

	WinQuake TimeDemos at 640x480	GL Quake TimeDemos at 640x480	DOS Quake TimeDemos at 640x480
	Frames Per Second	Frames Per Second	Frames Per Second
Falcon Northwest Mach V [1]	28.4	54.3	31.2
CGW Meltdown Machine	27.8	71.0	31.4
Dell XPS D233 [2]	14.7	N/A*	14.6
CGW Heavy Metal Rig	20.3	37.6	25.5

** GL Drivers Not Available at Press Time*

[1] The Falcon Mach V is as tested in our December issue: Pentium II 300MHz with 128MB of RAM with a list price of $8,495.

[2] The Dell XPS D233 is as tested in our January issue: Pentium II 233MHz with 32MB of RAM with a list price of $2,379.

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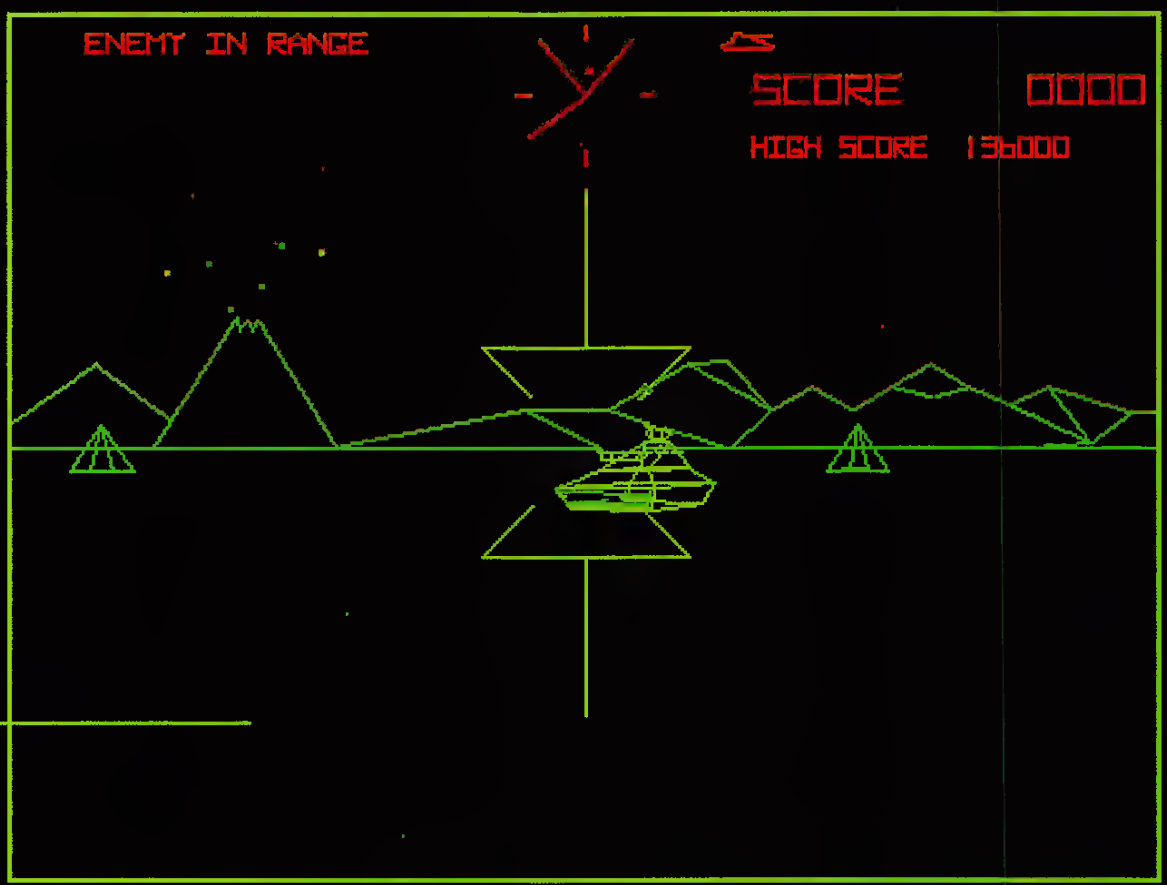
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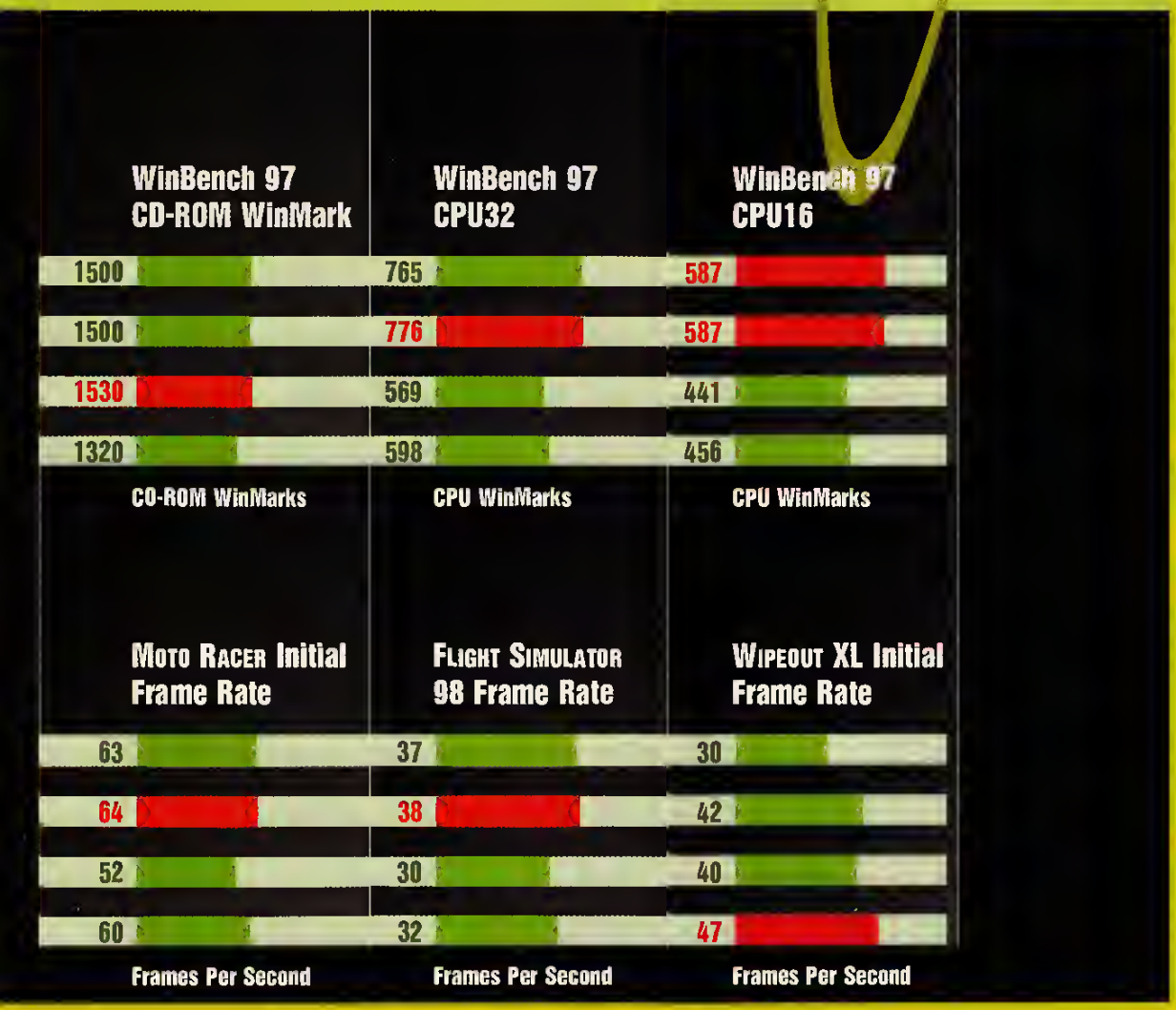
Battlezone Put You in Command of a Tank.



"framerate" at the race screen. Moto Racer is more complex. You need to have the Delphine-manufactured version (blue CD), not the Electronics Arts–manufactured version (white CD). Enable the frame counter by starting the game from a DOS window and typing "moto -ijklmnop". When in a race screen, hit Shift-F1 (function key 1). The frame rate we published was at the opening of the default race.

We took all the Quake numbers by averaging the results of TimeDemos 1, 2, and 3. We set the resolution to 640x480, with the status bar visible, but the screen otherwise maximized. We ran Duke Nukem 3D by typing "duke3d -m -s3 -t1" at the DDS prompt, then typing DNRATE after Duke's ship crashes.

Noticeably absent this year are any tests at a standard 320x200 VGA-graphics resolution. The last games I can recall that required this were Daggerfall and the DDS version of Red Alert.



Continued from page 95



interface. With a minimum 14x CD speed, 20MB/sec over the Ultra-SCSI interface, and a sub-90ms access time, this drive's performance approaches that of some hard drives.

The Heavy Metal's CD-RDM drive is the Goldstar CR-B241B EIDE CD-RDM drive. It's a slot-loading drive, only costs $90 by mail order, has a 90ms access time, and scores over 1,300 on ZD's WinBench CD-RDM test. It supports Mode 2 DMA, reducing the CPU utilization to 16 percent—not bad for an IDE CD-RDM drive.

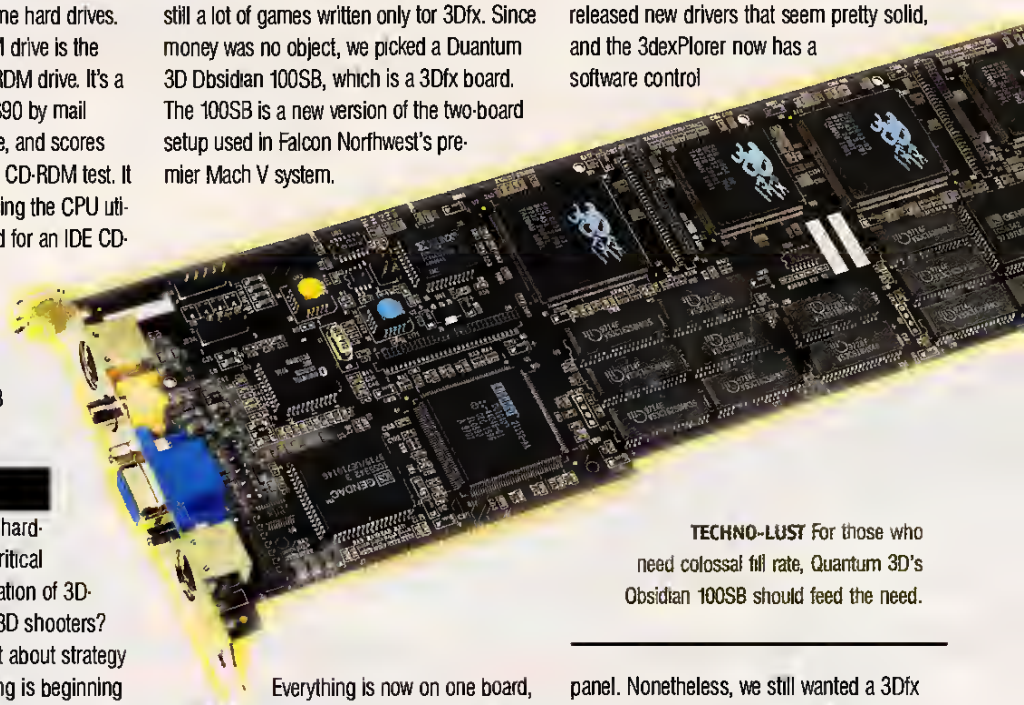
Floppy Drive We rounded out both systems with a lowly 3.5-inch, 1.44MB floppy drive made by TEAC.

Graphics

Next to the CPU, graphics hardware has become the most critical component for today's generation of 3D-accelerated games. Not into 3D shooters? What about flight sims? What about strategy games? Every genre of gaming is beginning to make some use of 3D graphics.

We filled the AGP slot in the Meltdown with the STB Velocity 12B AGP. We've been very impressed with the effort STB has been putting into its driver releases, so we gave the STB card the nod for our big rig. The RIVA 12B chip on the Velocity 12B is CPU-constrained. Even a 300MHz CPU can't deliver enough polygons to stress the RIVA's rendering ability. But the RIVA 128 chip isn't enough. There are still a lot of games written only for 3Dfx. Since money was no object, we picked a Quantum 3D Obsidian 100SB, which is a 3Dfx board. The 100SB is a new version of the two-board setup used in Falcon Northwest's premier Mach V system.

With the lower-cost rig, we still wanted a really hot graphics subsystem—and, surprisingly, we didn't have to compromise much. The primary (AGP) card is the ASUS 3DexPlorer. Although we gave it only 3.5 stars in last month's review, ASUS has since released new drivers that seem pretty solid, and the 3dexPlorer now has a software control panel. Nonetheless, we still wanted a 3Dfx card, and that was an easy choice: the Canopus Pure3D.



TECHNO-LUST For those who need colossal fill rate, Quantum 3D's Obsidian 100SB should feed the need.

Everything is now on one board, with its own PCI bridge chip. At the time we tested it, the DirectX drivers were still a little unstable, but GL QUAKE's performance was nothing short of incredible. With a little tweaking, it posted over 70 frames per second (fps). Watching the benchmark time demos using the 3D Obsidian 100SB was like watching an old Keystone Kops movie.

We would have liked to look at an AGP card using Rendition's new V2200 chip, but products weren't available in time.

One of the interesting points of the 440LX chipset was supposed to be its improved throughput. This may well be, but the DDS graphics performance we saw initially looked weak, despite the strong VGA-graphics core of the RIVA 12B. The issue with the Pentium II, as with last year's Pentium Pro, is throughput. The Pentium II is capable of write posting, linear frame-buffer (LFB) write combining, and banked VGA-graphics write combining. These features enable the Pentium II to pump VGA-graphics data over the PCI bus in big bursts, rather than in small driblets. Unfortunately, the ASUS motherboard has no way of turning on these features, so we had to resort to that old standby, FastVid. The AMI BIOS on the Supermicro board is a tweaker's delight. All the features needed to boost DOS graphics performance could be set in the BIOS.



1-2 PUNCH ASUS' 3DexPlorer and Canopus' Pure3D are a very hard combination to beat.

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Cyberathlete Dan (RIX) Hammans took first place at that QuakeCon '97, where Micron systems ruled. If you're serious about gaming, face real competition like RIX at www.cyberathlete.com. And if you're serious about computers, dare to call Micron or visit our Web site today.

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Monitor Of course, you need a monitor to be able to see the games. This was one of our toughest choices. At first, flat-panel options seemed intriguing, but we discarded that idea after determining that all of them still have a fixed pixel-count. If you've ever seen a 1024x768 flat-panel display interpolate pixels to handle a 640x480 game, you know what we mean. "Ugly" doesn't begin to cover it. A flat panel needs to be built with a fixed number of pixels. If you have a flat panel that can handle high resolutions (1024x768, say), then one of two things will happen when it shifts to 640x480. Either you'll get a very small 640x480 image in the center of the flat panel, or it will sum real pixels to make ugly, large ones.

The next option we looked at was one of those really big CRTs, such as the Mitsubishi 37-inch. This was pretty intriguing, but we sit close to the monitor with keyboard, mouse, and controllers when we play. Sit down a foot away from one of these big screens and it feels like you are craning your neck the whole time. We then went to a conventional 21-inch monitor. Here, there are several choices. We flirted briefly with the Mitsubishi 91TXM. It's a very nice, aperture grill monitor with a .28-inch stripe pitch. But we then saw a 24-inch (22.5-inch displayable) Sony GDM-W900.

Backup

Games don't need to be backed up, but backing up your Windows system and any other useful data is a very good idea. Tape back-up is tedious at best, so we popped in Syquest's Syjet 1.5, a 1.5GB, removable hard-drive that makes backups a snap.



The W900 is really designed for CAD or desktop publishing. It has a 16:10 aspect ratio, meaning that it's wider than a conventional monitor (HDTV is 16:9; normal computer CRTs are 4:3). At first, we were still a little reluctant. There's a visible blank area on either side of the picture when running at standard resolutions (kind of a letterbox effect). The display area is still a little larger than 21 inches, but not enormously so. It also costs $4,500, which is, by itself, the cost of a good computer. MOTO RACER has a 16:9 option for its gameplay, but it really doesn't look that great. I'm aware of no other game that supports 16:9 or 16:10. We were about to drop the W900 from our list, when a friend came over and sat in front of the screen. *"I want this monitor!"* he exclaimed in an awestruck voice.

That was all the justification we needed. As for our Heavy Metal rig, we really wanted to get a 17-inch monitor, and so we settled on the Optiquest Q71 (Optiquest is Viewsonic's budget line). It's a nice monitor, though the clicking of the electro-mechanical relay when it's switching resolutions is a little disconcerting. The picture is sharp, but the onscreen controls are not very intuitive. Still, it's fairly bright, has a .28mm dot pitch and costs only $450.

Sound

Some of the coolest moments in computer gaming are in the game audio. *Hearing* the sound effects in LucasArts' THEIR FINEST HOUR was incredible. Audio is one of the three cornerstone technologies that enable a great gaming experience (along with fast processors and great graphics).

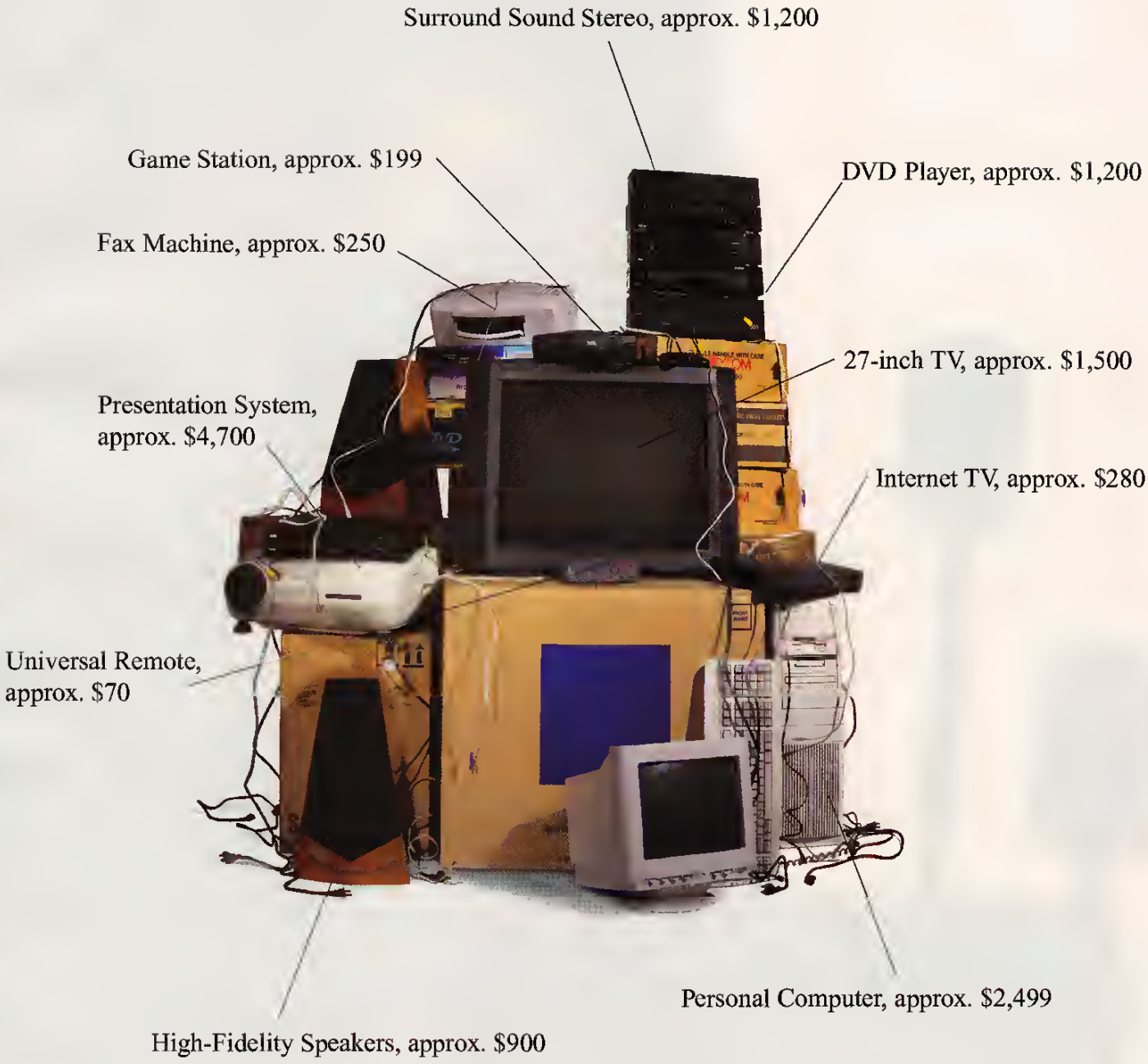
Continued on page 112

The Future of Performance

Systems Performance This is a delicate, shifting balance that never remains constant. Last year, the bottleneck was the graphics system. This year, it's the CPU. Even a 300MHz Pentium II can't saturate a RIVA 128 card. Next year, as game developers begin upping their budget for texture maps, bandwidth over the bus may become the bottleneck. One potential solution is to move some geometry calculations, such as lighting transforms, onto the graphics card. However, DirectX 6.0 doesn't look as if it will support hardware acceleration of geometry at this stage. OpenGL certainly is capable of this, but whether consumer-level cards will arrive that can accelerate geometry is, as yet, unknown.

CPU Performance CPU performance will soon be open to reexamination as well. Unfortunately, it's looking as if market fragmentation may well happen. AMD has announced the K6 3D CPU, which is scheduled to ship around mid-1998. It adds a lot of performance-boosting features and an improved floating-point unit. However, the "3D" in the name refers to a set of proprietary extensions designed to speed up 3D transforms. Integrated Device Technology (IDT) surprised everyone with its Centaur C6 CPU. The C6 is a poor floating-point performer, but IDT is feverishly working on a C6+ that speeds up floating-point and adds its own spin on speeding up 3D. Of course, Intel is working on MMX2 (just don't ask the folks at Intel about it). Current MMX instructions are 16-bit in nature, and MMX2 is rumored to be a full 32-bit instruction set. It's interesting to see how all these companies are attaching a great deal of importance to 3D graphics.

Also on the Intel Front There will likely be a new Pentium II coming out that will support a 100MHz system clock and run at 350- and 400MHz. On the chipset side, Intel's 440BX chipset is supposed to also support a 100MHz bus clock. VIA has added a new chipset that enables Socket 7 boards to have AGP, but whether this will really offer any performance boost is open to question. Also on the horizon is 4x AGP, which is theoretically capable of moving data to the graphics card from memory at up to 1GB/sec. This begs the question of memory bandwidth. Even SDRAM might have trouble keeping up. By then, though, Intel will begin implementing RAMBUS technology in mainstream systems. RAMBUS is a patented RAM technology licensed by a lot of DRAM vendors that enables very-high-speed memory transfers, but won't see system memory duty until sometime in 1999. And when the first IA-64 CPU (code-named Merced) debuts that same year, all bets are off.



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Upgrade Strategies

You may be reading all this and saying, "I'm just not ready to get a whole new system," or "I could get a whole new system...or I could stay married." The good news is that upgrading a component here and there can breathe life into your existing system; and with a well-thought-out upgrade strategy, you can go three to five years—or maybe longer—before buying an entirely new system.

The key word here is triage, a technique doctors use to treat wounded soldiers. It's a fairly simple idea: Treat the most critically wounded patient first, and take care of the lighter injuries later. The same strategy can be applied to upgrading your machine. Take a look at our Upgrade Table here, and see where your system components rate. They're listed in order of importance.

For killer game performance, upgrading the most ailing component among your CPU, memory, and graphics will deliver the most immediate increase in gaming performance. A couple of notes here: If you're running a 166MHz Pentium or better, you should consider upgrading your 2D/3D graphics first to get more out of your rig, since CPUs of this horsepower or better still have a good bit of life left in them. If you're happy with your current 2D board, and it has 4MB of onboard memory, consider a 3D-only board using the 3Dfx Voodoo chipset, though a PowerVR-based board isn't a bad choice for gamers on a tighter budget. In purchasing a 2D/3D board, 4MB of onboard memory is an absolute minimum, and given that Diamond's Stealth II costs only about $120, there's no reason to skimp here.

Moving to the storage components, if you've outgrown your current hard drive, that's a pretty obvious reason to upgrade to a bigger one. Disk storage space has never been cheaper: For under $400, you can pack 6.4GB of storage into your box, and for around $200, Seagate has a 3.2GB drive, though it doesn't support UltraDMA/33. We recommend drives that support UltraDMA/33, even if your current motherboard doesn't support it, so that when you do get a new motherboard, you can get some improvement in hard-drive performance as well.

A faster CD-RDM drive can certainly speed up game installs and scene loads, but it's less of a critical system component. But in addition to faster performance, many CD-RDM drives ship with a bus-mastering driver that cuts down on CPU usage, which can help overall game performance. However, unless you're CD-ROM is really gasping, upgrade other components first.

If you're not into online multiplayer gaming, faster data communications may not be an issue. A modem upgrade will make Web browsing less painful, and as our recent tests showed, the 56K modems have somewhat lower latency numbers than 28.8 V.34 modems. ISDN is the medium of choice for online gaming, but its associated costs may make it less appealing.

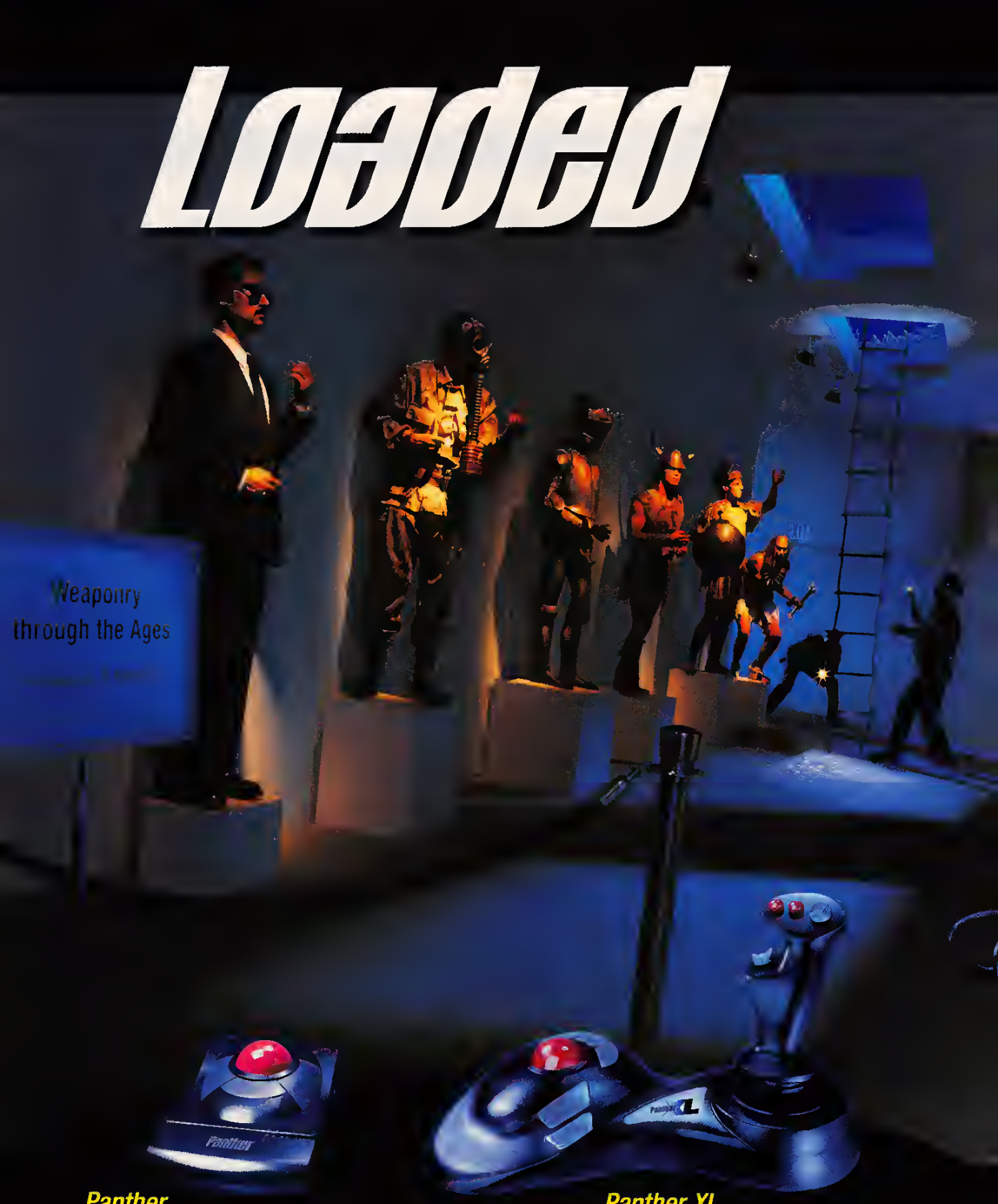
Upgrading won't always bring you the across-the-board speed-up that an entirely new system will, but it can certainly add life to aging systems. And after you've bought enough upgrades, you'll basically have wound up with a new system, but on a much more manageable payment plan. *—Dave Salvator*

UPGRADE CHART

Component	If You Have	Budget Upgrade	Performance Upgrade
CPU	Pentium 120MHz or slower	MMX OverDrive 200MHz (budget)*	Pentium II 300
Memory	8–16MB	32MB EDO DRAM (If your system can run SDRAM)	64MB SDRAM
3D Graphics	None Installed	Diamond Stealth II	3Dfx-based board (3D-only) or STB Velocity 128
2D Graphics	Card with 1–2MB local memory	Diamond Stealth II	STB Velocity 128
Hard Drive	1GB drive or less	Seagate 6.4GB UltraDMA/33	Seagate 4.5GB Cheetah Ultra-Wide SCSI
Communications	14.4K or 28.8K modem	Global Village (X2 56K) or Diamond SupraExpress (K56Flex 56K)	Diamond NetCommander (ISDN)
CD-ROM	2–4x drive	EIDE Goldstar CR-8241B	U/W SCSI Plextor 32x CAV

**Note: if your motherboard won't accept an upgrade CPU, go with a new LX-based motherboard with a P-II 233MHz. Even though it's an AGP motherboard, your PCI cards will work fine.*

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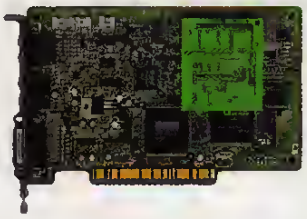
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Continued from page 104

Sound Cards The Meltdown needed something a little out of the ordinary. We started with a stock Diamond Monster Sound. Then we ripped out the tiny wavetable card that's attached. (WARNING: If you do this, it will probably void your warranty.) The little connector on the Monster Sound is, in fact, Wave Blaster–compatible. We then added a Roland SCD-15 Sound Canvas daughtercard, securing it to the Monster Sound with ordinary rubber bands. The MIDI music quality that results is quite a bit better than Monster's stock 2MB wavetable.



The cool thing about the Monster Sound, of course, is its use of Aureal Technologies' 3D positional audio, which definitely adds to the experience in a game like JEDI KNIGHT. Using HRTF (head-related transfer functions) to simulate positional audio, Aureal achieves its positional 3D-audio effect through a set of mathematical functions that simulate the delays and positional cues that your ears use to locate sound.

Just for the sake of DDS games, we popped a Creative Labs AWE-64 Gold into a free ISA slot. We're hoping that the AWE is the last ISA sound card we have to deal with. Still, it's a good, clean-sounding card and has always been trouble-free.

The Heavy Metal has a stock AWE-64 Value Edition. The Value Edition is a nice buy at $95. It's a little noisier than the Gold and doesn't have as much onboard RAM (512KB versus 4MB), but the price is right, it sounds fine, and it's compatible.

JURY-RIGGED Two ordinary rubber bands hold this Roland SCD-15 Sound Canvas daughtercard to this Monster Sound part.

Supersaver Rig

Let's say that even $2,500 is too rich for your blood. Can you build a hot-rod gaming box for $1,500? Sure you can. Incidentally, we realize there are various Pentium systems advertised for $1,000 or less. The difference between those systems and this one hinges on the quality of the components, the amount of RAM, and, perhaps, even the presence of a monitor. Mostly, it's a matter of different components. You get what you pay for, and it's always better to know what you're getting.

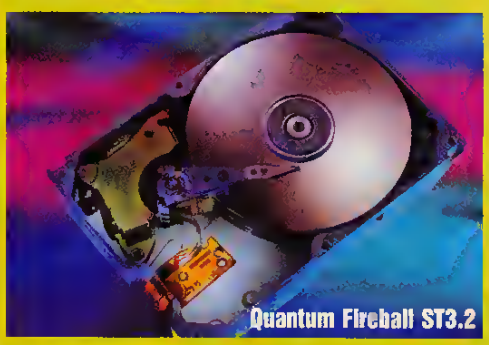
Start with a 233MHz Pentium with MMX technology. Pop it onto an Asus TX97-XE motherboard. Add 32MB of generic, 60ns EDO DRAM. Pick up an inexpensive case with a slide-out motherboard tray, and a 230-watt power supply. You now have the core of the system.

Good quality graphics hardware is hard to find in this price range, but the Diamond Stealth II is a real deal. It has the speedy Rendition V2100 chip and 4MB of 12ns SGRAM, all for $120. The Dptiquest 051 is a decent 15-inch monitor. For a hard drive, the Quantum Fireball ST3.2 can be found for around $220. The same Goldstar CD-RDM unit we used in the Heavy Metal machine works, too, at only $80. Add an AWE-64 Value Edition and a set of Cambridge SoundWorks PC Works, and things begin to cook.



Optiquest Q51

Of course, you need input devices; you can get a decent Keytronic keyboard for $25. Toss in the Logitech 4-button mouse and there's your data input. A standard 1.44MB floppy drive rounds things out.



Quantum Fireball ST3.2

Performance is pretty good. The Stealth II gets around 119 3D WinBench 97 WinMarks on a P55C/233. The disk is fairly fast. Overall, this is a solid system. We couldn't squeeze in a 3Dfx card at this price, but all the other components are actually pretty good. This system would have seemed otherworldly two years ago. Now you can have it for $1,500.


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A.I.

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Speakers Good sound cards deserve great speakers. For the Meltdown, we went with Eminent Technologies' LFT-11. It has two flat-panel linear field transducers and a beefy bass section. Eminent Technologies supplies an Optimus 15 watts per-channel receiver as an option; it's small, so it doesn't take up much space. These speakers stack up well against some very high-end, home-audio speakers. The only downside we've found to these babies (other than their $700 price tag) is that they are quite directional; but this is usually not a problem when you're sitting in front of a computer

For the Heavy Metal system, the Cambridge SoundWorks PC Works is the obvious choice. These are the best $100 speakers we've ever heard. The quality of their sound is mind boggling.

Input Devices

We've tried various mouse alternatives over the years, but the mouse and the keyboard are still our mainstays. Here at *CGW*, we do a lot of writing, so our choice for keyboard is the Microsoft Natural Keyboard for both systems.

A mouse is a mouse is a mouse—until you see the new Logitech mice. For the Meltdown, we use a Logitech Mouseman Plus, which has a unique, contoured shape that's easy on the hand. It has four buttons (!) and a scrolling wheel. To shave off 10 bucks, we went with the four-button (no wheel) version for the Heavy Metal rig. Rounding out all this is a Gel-eez mouse pad from Case Logic, which has a comfortable, gel-filled wrist rest.







Eminent Technologies LFT-11

Game Controllers

Controllers are perhaps the most personal of all game hardware. We tend to gravitate to different controllers, but for the ultimate setup, we prefer the new Saitek X-36 stick/throttle combo, paired with a set of CH Pro Pedals (you can deactivate the rudder gizmo on the X-36 throttle). For more casual gaming, we often plug in a CH Jane's Combat Stick in "F-16 Combat Stick Mode" for fast game sessions.

After using FLIGHT SIMULATOR 98 for testing, we've dusted off our venerable CH Pro Throttle. We haven't yet found a force-feedback device that interests us, they don't feel realistic. Actually, they all seem to be just joysticks with motors. For less money, one interesting stick is Microsoft's new SideWinder Precision Pro. It's a relatively low-cost, all-in-one controller, though it won't win any awards for looking or feeling realistic.

For driving, our favorite wheel is the ThrustMaster NASCAR Pro Wheel (called the Formula One Pro Wheel in Europe). We like the quick release clamps and instant disconnect for the cable. However, our sim driving is pretty light. If you're a hard-core CART racer, check out the Thomas Super Wheel (TSW). It looks somewhat industrial, but is built like an M1 tank. A force-feedback wheel intrigues us much more than a force-feedback

Continued on page 120

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MELTDOWN



MELTDOWN

Component	Vendor	Product	Price	Phone	Web URL
Motherboard	Supermicro	Supermicro P6DLS	$510	(408) 895-2000	www.supermicro.com
CPU	Intel	PII/300	$830	(800) 628-8686	www.intel.com
Memory	Micron / Crucial Tech.	64M8 SDRAM	$320	(208) 898-3900	www.micron.com
Graphics (Primary)	ST8	ST8 Velocity 128	$189	(972) 234-8750	www.stb.com
Graphics (Secondary)	Quantum3D	Obsidian 100S8	$795	(408) 919-9999	www.quantum3d.com
Display	Sony	Sony W900	$4,500	(800) 222-7669	www.sony.com
Hard drive	Seagate	Cheetah Raid	$1,500	(408) 439-2859	www.seagate.com
Hard-drive controller	Mylex	Mylex Flashpoint DW	$375	(408) 496-0900	www.mylex.com
Floppy	Teac	Teac	$30	(213) 726-0303	www.teac.com
Removable	Syquest	Syjet 1.5	$300	(510) 226-5386	www.syquest.com
Case	JDR	JDR Microdevices	$125	(800) 538-5000	www.jdr.com
Power Supply	PC Power & Cooling	PCP&C turbo 300	$125	(800) 722-6555	www.pcpowercooling.com
Keyboard	Microsoft	MS Natural	$63	(425) 882-8080	www.microsoft.com
Mouse	Logitech	Logitech Mouseman Plus	$59	(800) 231-7717	www.logitech.com
Sound Card (1)	Creative Labs	AWE-64 Gold	$169	(800) 998-5227	www.soundblaster.com
Sound Card (2)	Diamond Multimedia	Monster Sound	$189	(800) 468-5846	www.diamondmm.com
Speakers	Eminent Technology	Eminent LFT-11	$700	(850) 575-5655	www.eminenttech.com
CD ROM	Plextor	Plextor UltraPlex	$225	(800) 886-3935	www.plextor.com
		TOTAL:	**$11,004**		

HEAVY METAL

Component	Vendor	Product	Price	Phone	Web URL
Motherboard	ASUS	P2L97	$210	(408) 474-0567	www.asus.com.tw
CPU	Intel	PII/233	$430	(800) 628-8686	www.intel.com
Memory	Generic	32M8 SDRAM	$160	N/A	N/A
Graphics (Primary)	Asus	3OexPlorer	$200	(408) 474-0567	www.asus.com.tw
Graphics (Secondary)	Canopus	Pure3D	$179	(408) 954-4500	www.canopus.com

Display	Viewsonic	Optiquest Q71	$450	(909) 869 7976	www.viewsonic.com
Hard drive	Seagate	Seagate 7200	$350	(408) 439 2859	www.seagate.com
Hard drive controller	N/A	Built-in	$0	N/A	N/A
Floppy	Teac	Teac	$30	(213) 726-0303	www.teac.com
Removable	N/A	None	$0	N/A	N/A
Case	N/A	Generic	$75	N/A	N/A
Power Supply	N/A	(250 included)	$0	N/A	N/A
Keyboard	Microsoft	MS Natural	$63	(425) 882-8080	www.microsoft.com
Mouse	Logitech	Logitech 4 button	$49	(800) 231 7717	www.logitech.com
Sound Card (1)	Creative Labs	AWE-64 Value Edition	$95	(800) 998-5227	www.soundblaster.com
Sound Card (2)	N/A	None	$0	N/A	N/A
Speakers	Cambridge SoundWorks	PC Works	$99	(800) 367-4434	www.hifi.com
CD-ROM	Goldstar	Goldstar Slot Drive	$90	(800) 243-0000	www.goldstar.com
		TOTAL:	**$2,480**		

SUPERSAVER RIG

Component	Vendor	Product	Price	Phone	Web URL
Motherboard	ASUS	TX97 XE	$150	(408) 474 0567 x236	www.asus.com.tw
CPU	Intel	Pentium 233 w/MMX	$220	(800) 628 8686	www.intel.com
Memory	Generic	32 M8 EDO DRAM	$80	N/A	N/A
Graphics (Primary)	Diamond Multimedia	Stealth II	$120	(800) 468 5846	www.diamondmm.com
Graphics (Secondary)	N/A	None	$0	N/A	N/A
Display	Viewsonic	Optiquest Q51	$230	(909) 869 7976	www.viewsonic.com
Hard drive	Quantum	Quantum Fireball ST3.2	$220	(408) 324 7415	www.quantum.com
Hard drive controller	N/A	Built-in	$0	N/A	N/A
Floppy	Teac	Teac	$30	(213) 726 0303	www.teac.com
Removable	N/A	None	$0	N/A	N/A
Case	N/A	Generic	$75	N/A	N/A
Power Supply	N/A	(250 included)	$0	N/A	N/A
Keyboard	Keytronic	Keytronic	$25	(800) 262 6006	www.keytronic.com
Mouse	Logitech	Logitech 4 button	$49	(800) 231 7717	www.logitech.com
Sound Card (1)	Creative Labs	AWE-64 Value Edition	$95	(800) 998-5227	www.soundblaster.com
Sound Card (2)	N/A	None	$0	N/A	N/A
Speakers	Cambridge SoundWorks	PC Works	$99	(800) 367 4434	www.hifi.com
CD-ROM	Goldstar	Goldstar Slot Drive	$90	(800) 243-0000	www.goldstar.com
		TOTAL:	**$1,483**		



HEAVY METAL

Continued from page 116

joystick, but we didn't have the chance to try one out for this year's rig.

We're not big on gamepads, but the ThrustMaster Rage 3D (not to be confused with the ATI Rage graphics accelerator) feels very nice, indeed. You can connect up to four pads for multiplayer action. It's a major improvement over Thrusty's old pad.

One other gadget we sometimes use is Saitek's PC Dash. The PC Dash is a nifty little programmable touchpad that can be configured however you wish.

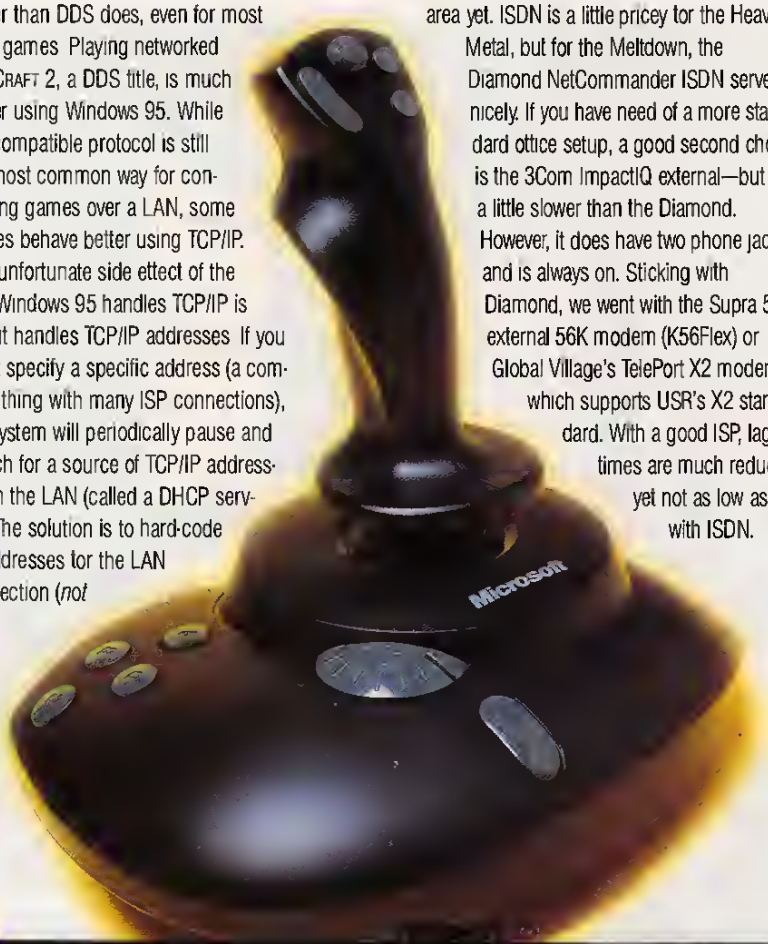


Network Hardware

Single-player gaming still occupies three-quarters of our game time, but every now and then, friends drop in with their computer for a network game session. We still like the 3Com Etherlink XL 10/100. It's very easy to set up and we've never had any hardware conflicts with the XL. We have a NetGear FE-108, 8-port, 100Mbit hub. There's no problem with lag time in this setup.

Setting up a LAN is not necessarily a simple matter, although Windows 95 makes it much easier than DOS does, even for most DOS games. Playing networked WarCraft 2, a DOS title, is much easier using Windows 95. While IPX-compatible protocol is still the most common way for connecting games over a LAN, some games behave better using TCP/IP. One unfortunate side effect of the way Windows 95 handles TCP/IP is how it handles TCP/IP addresses. If you don't specify a specific address (a common thing with many ISP connections), the system will periodically pause and search for a source of TCP/IP addresses on the LAN (called a DHCP server). The solution is to hard-code IP addresses for the LAN connection (*not your dial-up connection!*). There are actually blocks of IP addresses reserved for private, internal-only networks. Here's the list: 10.0.0.0–10.255.255.255, 172.16.0.0–172.31.255.255, and 192.168.0.0–192.168.255.255. Pick a set of numbers from these ranges for your own internal network.

Our engine of choice for connectivity is ISDN (living in California is a blessing for this reason, at least). Cable modems haven't filtered into our area yet. ISDN is a little pricey for the Heavy Metal, but for the Meltdown, the Diamond NetCommander ISDN serves nicely. If you have need of a more standard office setup, a good second choice is the 3Com ImpactIQ external—but it's a little slower than the Diamond. However, it does have two phone jacks and is always on. Sticking with Diamond, we went with the Supra 56e external 56K modem (K56Flex) or Global Village's TelePort X2 modem, which supports USR's X2 standard. With a good ISP, lag times are much reduced, yet not as low as with ISDN.



Fusion

If you've glanced at the price list, you've seen that the Meltdown comes in at around $11,000. However, our Heavy Metal rig is perhaps more noteworthy. It's no slouch in performance, and has a lot of solid components. We might spend a few bucks more on another 32MB of RAM, but overall, it's a very decent system. It certainly would provide a good springboard for future upgrading, and it's a great system for those of us who aren't quite so obsessive about performance.

Looking back on our first ultimate rig article, it's mind-blowing that $2,500 now buys you a 233MHz, 32-bit processor with MMX technology, a 7,200RPM hard-drive, speedy (and gorgeous-looking) 3D acceleration, and a 17-inch monitor. This *was* the high end, folks. Technology marches on.

The Meltdown is the ultimate dream machine. But it also requires a lot more pampering than does the Heavy Metal. There's a lot of bleeding-edge stuff in it, and it requires a little extra TLC to keep it running smoothly. As is the case with a Dodge Viper, it's a bit uncivilized—but it is one fast puppy when speed is what you need. However, if this year's $2,500 system is any indication, then what you see here will probably be the mainstream in two years.

We hope you find the information helpful, and we're sure you'll get the performance you expect. Until next month, may all your hardware live happily together.

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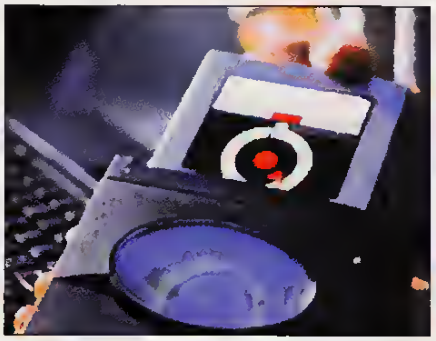
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Comdex Sightings

If you want to see how big the computer industry is, spend a few hours at Comdex. This year about 250,000 people made the pilgrimage to Las Vegas for what is now the largest trade show in the world. With 10,000 products on display, it's impossible to see everything, so you have to pick your targets. After surviving the thronging crowds, here's what I have to report.

I saw several new 32x EIDE CD-ROM drives that looked promising, but I didn't see any UltraATA drives. Wandering through the Creative Labs booth, I noticed 3Dfx's software chief intently eyeing users' reaction to Creative's Voodoo 2 demo. And speaking of Voodoo 2, there were demos in a number of places, mostly running TUROK and a couple of racing games. The QUAKE II demo was oddly absent. Creative Labs showed some other interesting stuff, including a DVD-RAM drive (though the standard is still up in the air) and a—gasp!—PCI sound card. It looks as if 1998 will be the end of the ISA sound card. (And there will be much rejoicing.)



Other graphics sightings included Intel's new 2D/3D accelerator, the i740 (code-named Auburn; see 3D IronWorks), a Pentium II laptop (no, it doesn't use Slot 1; it's the next-generation chip), and several USB mice. Logitech showed a wireless keyboard/mouse combo that will be sold as a bundle. It uses Logitech's radio technology, so no line-of-sight is needed to an IR receiver.

Several companies, including 3Com and Diamond, showed technology using modems that can be paired together to deliver an aggregate throughput of 112Kbps. Of course, this technology requires two phone lines, but unlike ISDN, much of the technology for supporting these dual-line connections is already in place (in ISPs that use Ascend routers). I also got a peek at 3Com's new cable modems. One problem with cable modems is that most cable companies aren't equipped for two-way traffic. 3Com's newly acquired U.S. Robotics division has solved that problem by using standard V.34 modems to handle upstream traffic, potentially opening up much more of the country to cable modem technology. This might be great for Web browsing, but I expressed my concerns to 3Com about potential latency problems. The good news is that the company will check out the issue in its lab.

New mass-storage options abounded. Syquest had a couple of interesting items, the first one being their new ICB removable hard-drive. Dubbed the Sparq, it will retail for $199 (with cartridges for only $33). This looks like a killer piece of gear. Another interesting product is the company's not-yet-shipping 4.7CB removable drive. It will list closer to $600, but a 4.7CB cartridge will cost less than $200. Seagate showed its new Cheetah II. As with the earlier Cheetah (which we selected for our Ultimate Game Machine), it spins at 10,000RPM, but the access time is down to 5.2 milliseconds, and it runs much cooler than the original part.

On the processor front, we caught a glimpse of the capabilities of the AMD K6 3D chip. The K6 adds additional instructions that don't exist in Intel processors to help speed up mathematical operations used in 3D graphics. Cleverly, AMD has developed a HAL for Direct3D, so programmers can use the additional instructions in a standard way. For example, we saw 3D WinBench run faster on a prototype K6 3D/300 than on an identically configured Pentium II/300. What's more, we saw a demo of Dreamworks' upcoming TRESPASSER: JURASSIC PARK that looked better on the K6 3D than on the Pentium II. The frame rate was the same on both CPUs, but the Pentium II ran at 320x200 while the K6 ran at 512x384. Oh, and the K6 version had translucent water and filtered textures. —*Loyd Case*

HARDWARE PIPELINE

Product	E.T.A.
Deschutes (400MHz Pentium II)	Q1 '98
440BX chipset (supports 100MHz system clock, 4 CPUs)	Q1 '98
3Dfx Voodoo 2	Q1 '98
S3 ViRGE GX3	Q2 '98



New High-End Intel Accelerator

For more than a year, Intel has been working on a project to bring Lockheed Martin's high-end 3D technology to the PC market. Until now, there's been very little information about the Intel project, code-named Auburn. At the Comdex computer show, I managed to play with a prototype of the 2D/3D board, called the i740, and I have some numbers to report. Bear in mind that both hardware and software were beta, so these numbers will most likely change. But even for a beta, this part looks promising.

I ran 3D WinBench 98 to take a close look at the feature-set supported by the i740. One immediately noticeable result was image quality, which was quite good—especially MIP-mapping. The i740 did not support the higher-end MIP-mapping features (for example, linear/mipmap/linear in 3D WinBench 98 parlance) but the more common MIP-mapping modes showed none of the odd streaking or artifacting visible in RIVA 128 cards. The chip also supports antialiasing, though this feature didn't seem to be turned on in a way that 3D WinBench was able to recognize.

The i740 delivered impressive performance. The card was AGP-based with 4MB of video memory, running on a 266MHz Pentium II. This beta version of the i740 came in with a score of 460, placing it between the 3Dfx-equipped Monster3D—which gets around 370—and the RIVA 128 cards, which come in around 490. Given the overall image quality—quite good—this isn't a bad score at all.

The real issue is what impact the i740 will have on the overall graphics chip market. If Intel can deliver a chip at a relatively low cost with reasonable 2D and 3D performance, some of the more marginal players may be muscled out of the way.

I wasn't able to check out 2D performance or real games. But I'm cautiously impressed, particularly if the price point is right. *—Loyd Case*

ACRONYM O' THE MONTH

DSLAM: Digital Subscriber Line Access Multiplexer

A piece of networking hardware used for increasing throughput in DSL connections.

LOYD CASE • UNDER THE HOOD

Driver Ed

Or, What a Difference a Driver Makes



Graphics cards used to be easy. After running through more than 30 graphics cards in the last few months, I dug into my archives to reread the video card review in the September 1994 *Computer Gaming World*. Back then, the only real game we used for testing was FLIGHT SIMULATOR 5.0a. One of our test mainstays was a DOS benchmark called 3Dbench. DirectX wasn't even a twinkle in Microsoft's eye at the time, and Windows 95 was still called "Chicago." Almost every game shipping ran under DOS. We tested on two systems, a "mainstream" 486/66 VESA local-bus system and a "high-end" Pentium 90.

My, how times have changed.

THE ART OF PERFORMANCE

In 1994, performance in gaming was defined by how many pixels you could push through the video card. There was only one game (FLIGHT SIM TOOLKIT) that used the 2D acceleration features of certain graphics cards, and no mainstream title used 3D acceleration—though Matrox had a couple of technology demos on their high-end CAD-oriented cards. We ran WinBench 2D WinMarks almost as an afterthought.

Today, it's much more complicated. You not only have to worry about Windows 2D performance (since many of us, willingly or unwillingly, live and work in the Windows environment), but now you also have to deal with DirectDraw, Direct3D, and OpenGL.

The graphics cards themselves, though much simpler in appearance, are more complex than ever. Feature sets for 3D accelerators vary so

▸▸▸Continued on pg 124

▸▸▸Continued from pg 123

much, you wonder how any game can possibly run successfully on all of them—and few actually do.

Driver writers are the unsung heroes (and villains, for that matter) in today's complex driver environment. A good driver writer can wring out that last ounce of performance and turn a mediocre graphics card into a good one—or a good one into a great one. In the past few months, I've tested more than 30 graphics cards. Time after time, I've been surprised by a new driver's increase in performance or newly added feature.

One good example of this is the RIVA 128 chip. The PCI version of the STB Velocity 128 fell just a little short of the Diamond Viper in our October review. By the time we tested the ACP versions for last month's reviews, STB had been aggressively incorporating new updates from NVIDIA. Early Velocity 128 drivers didn't have fog-table support enabled, but the most recent drivers included it. All of a sudden, I could run SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE with the STB card and have full fog effects. Diamond has since upgraded its drivers as well, but it's interesting to note how drivers can affect a card's performance.

Another interesting case in point is the ATI Rage Pro. The Xpert@play and All-in-Wonder Pro use this chip for 3D acceleration. Our early testing indicated that the Rage Pro was far better than its predecessor, the Rage II+. Nonetheless, it fell far short of the performance of the RIVA 128 cards or 3Dfx boards. Over the next several months, each subsequent beta driver from ATI improved performance by 25 percent (at least in 3D WinBench).

IMAGE QUALITY

Which brings us to the issue of image quality and 3D graphics. FLIGHT SIMULATOR 98's default VCR replay is an interesting test, as it demonstrates some of the sim's new features. Pay close attention to the Paris scenery near the end of the replay. On some cards, the textures annoyingly flash in and out. FLIGHT SIMULATOR 98 seems to be a bit finicky about MIP-mapping (the flashing textures are different level-of-detail terrain textures being swapped in and out too quickly). The Rage Pro has this problem (although the driver wizards at ATI are busy working on the next fix). If you run the same VCR replay on the Canopus Pure3D, you don't see any flickering—but the textures look a little too filtered, which is one of the hallmarks of 3Dfx boards.

The RIVA 128 boards don't escape our scrutiny, either. Occasional texture cracking (when you can see between polygon seams) was one of the problems with the drivers we reviewed in our graphics card showdown.

Image quality also tends to be a relative thing. Unlike 2D scenes, there are myriad subtle ways to render a 3D scene. Once you get a 3D card and live with it for a while, another card's rendering of the same game will look different to you. Since humans tend to favor the familiar, different often translates to "bad." In some cases, the differences are a matter of lower quality (just look at the rendering quality of one of the original Laguna 3D boards, such as the Graphics Blaster 3D). In other cases, the differences are simply a matter of taste (witness the bashing that goes on between opposing devotees of 3Dfx and Rendition chips, for example).



FUZZY LOGIC FLIGHT SIMULATOR 98 is a useful tool for checking 3D feature support. Here's an example of a MIP-map that's only partially loaded. Note the sharp transition to a fuzzy texture halfway up the outside view.

PLATFORM BLUES

Standard APIs are wonderful things—in theory. Once you have one or two standard APIs, everyone can write to them and stop worrying about designing their own 3D-rendering engines. But standard APIs can become a "least common denominator" that will exclude

TECH TIPS

▸WHO'S ON FIRST?

If you have more than one 3D accelerator in your system, it's not always obvious which card is being used by a particular Direct3D game. We found a cool utility called 3DCC (3D Control Center) on Videologic's Web site. It allows you to switch between the primary, secondary, and PowerVR card. You can get it at **www.videologic.com/vlsoft/a3d.htm**.

▸TURN BACK THE CLOCK

I'm not an advocate of overclocking your Voodoo Graphics card, but if you are going to do it, you should practice "safe" overclocking. One way is to add a fan to your 3Dfx card. We came across a handy fan designed for just that purpose, the 3DfxCool. It's a simple device that can help your 3Dfx texture processor stay cool when you jack it up to 60MHz. But don't tell 3Dfx I wrote this!

You can check out the 3DfxCool at **www.3dfxcool.com**. Make sure you tell them which 3Dfx board you have.

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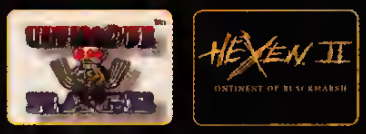
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technologies that don't quite behave the way the API expects The PowerVR chip from NEC and Videologic is a good example If you've seen GL QUAKE on a PowerVR accelerator, you know it looks pretty good You can quibble about differences in image quality between the 3Dfx PowerVR versions, but GL QUAKE on the PowerVR chip nonetheless looks very nice But Direct3D and the PowerVR don't always get along very well Performance can vary radically from one D3D title to the next. These quirky interactions also have an adverse impact on how 3D WinBench "sees" the card With OpenGL, there's a method for adding extensions in a standard way (That's right, you can add nonstandard features in a standard way; think about that for a moment It's a powerful idea.) Direct3D doesn't really have this now, though DirectX 6 0 will have a mechanism for talking directly to the hardware.

CHEATING

There's not much difference in real-world performance between a card that gets a 2D WinBench 97 score of 85 and one that gets 100 But the difference sells cards, and card manufacturers look for anything that gives them an edge in marketing One method is called GDI bypass. GDI (Graphics Display Interface) is the standard way Windows renders regular, 2D, Windows-related, non-game graphics GDI is what the programmers use when they want to have a window opened, a menu pulled down, or a bitmap painted. Several years ago, graphics card makers discovered they could substitute their own methods for doing these functions and bypass GDI. The result was a dubious increase in real-world performance, but boy, did those benchmark scores suddenly jump

The problem with GDI bypass is the potential for compatibility problems In stepped Microsoft, using its muscle in a positive way. Now, graphics drivers go through a certification process managed by Microsoft's WHQL (Windows Hardware Quality Lab) If a driver turns on GDI bypass by default, it can't get a WHQL certification So check to see if your graphics hardware has a WHQL-certified driver This doesn't mean that a driver won't have bugs—it just means that it's written to conform to Microsoft guidelines.

CHECK YOUR DRIVERS

Graphics drivers are critical Check your driver rev numbers, and make sure that you get the latest updates. It can make a big difference in performance and image quality

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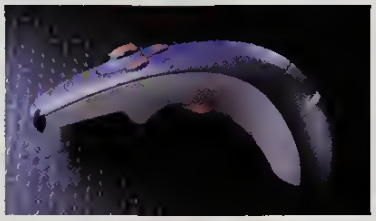
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Plextor Delivers





by Loyd Case

When we reviewed Plextor's 12/20 SCSI CD-ROM drive (*CGW* #158, September 1997), we said it was the last CD-ROM drive you would ever need. That assessment is probably still accurate. However, if you have a slower CD-ROM drive, (which means anything except a 12/20), consider Plextor's newest offering, the UltraPlex.

The UltraPlex is a CAV (constant angular velocity) CD-ROM unit that is rated from 14x on the inner tracks to a full 32x on the outer tracks. This is an Ultra-SCSI device, so it aptly handles the fire hose–sized flood of data this drive can pour into your system. If you have a SCSI host adapter capable of Ultra-SCSI speeds, the UltraPlex can handle burst data transfer rates of up to 20MB/sec. Using WinBench 98's CD-ROM test, the UltraPlex cranked out a stellar 1670 CD WinMarks, with only 3.8 percent CPU utilization. (The host adapter was an Adaptec 2940UW). WinBench 98 also measured an average access time of 95 milliseconds.

This drive supports just about any CD-ROM format you can imagine, including the new CD-RW discs. It also has a neat feature for audio buffs—the capability of extracting CD Audio (red-book) data across the SCSI bus at full speed. This is far in excess of the old SPD/IF connector's 1x speed. The UltraPlex comes in both caddy and tray models; caddies were reintroduced with the UltraPlex due to customer demand (the caddy protects CDs that are being passed around offices).

The UltraPlex can be purchased as an external or internal drive, optional SCSI host adapters are also available, but they'll cost you more. A floppy disk with some handy control utilities (including audio extraction) comes with the drive.

If you want a CD-ROM drive that's incredibly fast, well-mannered, and easy on your CPU, take a good look at the UltraPlex.

APPEAL: Anyone who wants the ultimate CD-ROM drive.

PROS: A CD-ROM drive that behaves almost like a hard drive; cool digital audio extraction; supports all CD formats.

CONS: A little pricey; needs SCSI host adapter.

CG LABS RATED ★★★★★

Price: $250 (internal version, no SCSI adapter)
Vendor: Plextor
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www.plextor.com

A Media Geek's Delight



by Loyd Case

I've never been very interested in convergence—that warm, fuzzy term that suggests a mating between interactive and passive media technologies. That was until I popped the All-in-Wonder Pro (AIWP) AGP card into my system and became hooked.

I admit it. Beyond *Babylon 5*, I watch almost no television. With the AIWP, though, I find myself running TV in the background, if only to be able to check out CNN occasionally. The TV tuner is pretty amazing, too. It can search for specific channels, put up little thumbnails of numerous channels on your screen, and perform keyword searches on closed-captioning text.

The video capture features look interesting as well, although AIWP uses software-only compression. Another upside: The All-in-Wonder Pro's NTSC output is very clean, and produces solid image-quality when running through a television.

Ultimately, though, I'm a game player, so I needed to be convinced of the All-in-Wonder's 3D and 2D graphics capabilities. I ran the ATI card in an ACP-equipped, 266MHz Pentium II (alongside a Diamond Monster 3D). Using 3D WinBench 98's extensive new quality tests, I was able to really wring out the Direct3D performance of the All-in-Wonder Pro. The Pro supports an impressive set of features; about the only things lacking are antialiasing and per-pixel MIP-mapping. The 3D WinBench 98 aggregate frame-rate came in at 346. (This number was for an 8MB card; a 4MB card might not get a score quite this high.) This compares quite favorably to the Monster 3D's 349. Still, there are a few image-quality problems in Direct3D games, such as the severe texture flashing in Microsoft FLIGHT SIMULATOR 98. MOTO RACER and WIPEOUT XL looked pretty good, though. DOS and Windows 2D numbers were good, if not at the top of the heap.

Overall, the All-in-Wonder Pro is a terrific card if you want to have TV tuner and video capabilities tightly integrated with your system. It's no slouch as a 3D accelerator, either, although we're eagerly awaiting ATI's new driver releases, which promise even better performance and fixes for some of the image-quality issues. Those caveats aside, this card is worth a look.



APPEAL: Anyone who wants a solid 2D/3D accelerator coupled with a TV tuner.

PROS: Great TV management; solid 2D- and 3D-performance.

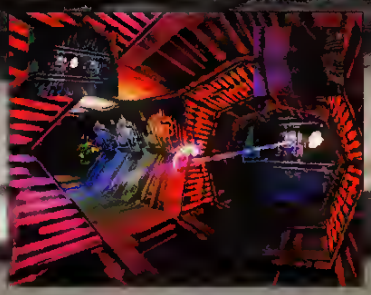
CONS: Expensive; needs a cable TV connection for full effect.

CG LABS RATED ★★★★½

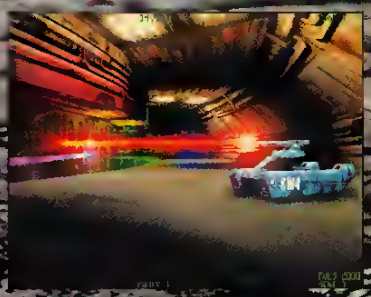
Price: $379 (4MB), $449 (8MB)
Vendor: ATI Technologies
(905) 882-2600
www.atitech.ca

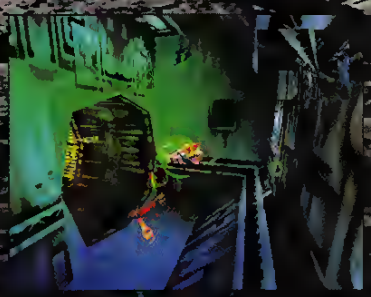

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Little Big Screen

Creative Labs Breaks the $400 Barrier

by Dave Salvator

DVD represents a major paradigm shift in storage, content distribution, and media presentation. Or something. The marketing of DVD has been a study in hyperbole. But like it or not, DVD is here to stay, and will eventually supplant conventional CD-ROM drives in PCs. So what does this mean for gamers? Two words: bigger bit-bucket. Yes, you'll also get MPEG-2 video playback and Dolby Digital (AC-3) 6-channel audio for movies, but very few games make effective use of full-motion video in actual gameplay. So DVD's main contribution for gamers will be gobs of storage space — from 7 to more than 25 times that of a traditional CD-ROM. This bigger bit-bucket translates into more detailed graphics, higher-quality sounds, and better-looking trailers.

One major roadblock to DVD has been the price of the kits, which usually range from $600 to $800. But Creative Labs brings in its new PC-DVD Encore DXR2 for under $400. The kit includes an EIDE 2x DVD-ROM drive and an MPEG-2 decoder board. The bundleware includes DVD versions of WING COMMANDER IV and that oldie but goodie, DRAGON'S LAIR. Other notables: S-video output from the MPEG-2 decoder board, and SP/DIF digital audio output to route to a Dolby AC-3-enabled amplifier.

Installation proves fairly painless, though by its nature, it's a somewhat involved process. You'll need an available 5-1/4-inch drive bay and a free PCI slot. The DVD-ROM drive comes preconfigured as an IDE slave device and can be placed on either your primary or secondary EIDE controller. Just to make the decoder board installation a little more interesting, I installed it into a system that already had a 3Dfx-based 3D-only board to see if that would give PC-DVD Encore any trouble. It didn't. Once both devices were physically in place, I fired up the system. The DVD-ROM drive was detected on POST, and when Windows 95 came up, I fed it a driver disk for the detected DVD decoder board, and the unit's drivers were installed. Next, I installed Creative's PC-DVD Player for playing DVD titles, and the unit was good to go. Though not enabled by default, the DVD-ROM drive supports EIDE bus-mastering, which lowers CPU usage during transfers. Another note: This second-generation DVD-ROM drive can read CD-R media, something first-generation drives couldn't do.



Although DVD-ROM will play an increasingly important role in PCs, its performance as a CD-ROM drive, though improved, still falls short of traditional drives. Creative rates the PC-DVD's drive as a 20x CD-ROM drive. But in WinBench 98's CD-ROM WinMark test, Creative's DVD-ROM turned in a score of 961, compared to a 1,320 by the test system's installed 24x Toshiba drive — making the DVD drive only about three-quarters as fast as the CD-ROM drive. Other performance news is mixed. While the DVD-ROM's CPU usage came in at 3.6 percent, compared to the CD-ROM's 5.3 percent, its access time was 148 milliseconds, versus the CD-ROM's 111. So if you're hell-bent on having a DVD-ROM unit in your rig, you'd do well to hold on to your existing CD-ROM drive, and run both.

I also ran a wide variety of DVD movie content on the PC-DVD Encore, and the results were, by and large, impressive. At 800x600x16-bit color, image quality was smooth — both in a window and full-screen — thanks to Encore's bilinear interpolation filtering. This type of filtering smoothes pixelation when the playback image is scaled up, but will sometimes cause a blurry effect if not done well. Blurring was minimal, even on credits. When I upped the resolution to 1024x768 and 1280x1024, image quality headed south somewhat, with some visible deinterlacing that produced jaggies on vertical lines. The Encore's bundled DVD player features a remote-control–like interface, and is readily navigated for playing DVD content. The player can also play MPEG-1 and VideoCD content.

Creative's second-generation DVD kit gets a lot right, including the price. But DVD-RAM drives — which let you write data as well as read it — should ship by the end of 1998. And while DVD-based games will begin to ship in 1998, there's no pressing need yet to have DVD in a gaming box. But if you just *have* to have DVD, this part warrants a look.

Price: $379
Vendor: Creative Labs
(800) 998-5227
www.soundblaster.com

APPEAL: Gamers who *must* have DVD in their rig.

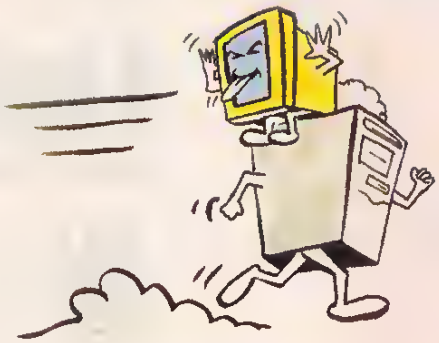
PROS: Easy hardware installation; aggressively priced.

CONS: DVD's throughput performance still can't match a typical CD-ROM drive; some installation headaches; a few configuration problems with DVD player.

CG LABS RATED ★★★½☆

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★★★½☆ REVIEW • KDS VS-19 MONITOR

Livin' Large

by Dave Salvator



When it comes to displays, bigger is usually better. Of course, with CRT monitors, a bigger picture usually equates to a smaller desk, especially when you move into the behemoth 21-inch and 24-inch range. KDS' new VS-19 monitor—which is actually a 20-inch monitor—does take up a fair amount of desk real estate, but the bigger picture may be worth the sacrifice.

The VS-19 has fairly well detailed on-screen display (OSD) controls that let you tweak contrast, brightness, geometry (vertical/horizontal, sizing/position), and color temperature settings. Getting into the controls is pretty easy, though I didn't find a way to back completely out, and instead waited for the control panel to time-out and disappear. Setup is straightforward, since the VS-19 is a Plug-and-Play monitor, though the lack of a monitor-specific INF file (which lists the monitor's top-end refresh rates) is annoying, because it makes tweaking refresh rates more difficult. The good news here is that the VS-19 supports up to 75Hz vertical refresh at 1600x1200.

Once setup is complete, the rest of the news is, for the most part, good. When I put the VS-19 through its paces with EA's NBA LIVE 98, its image quality was bright, and colors looked rich and full. And as someone who normally works on a 17-inch monitor, the difference in screen size is appreciable.

One noticeable curiosity: the VS-19's front glass has a much more pronounced convex curve to it than most monitors, resulting in some image "warping" in the screen's four corners. And while the effect was pretty evident when I ran test patterns, it didn't detract much from image quality during gameplay.

All told, the VS-19 is a good monitor offering larger size and good image quality for under $1,000. The lack of a specific INF file is an annoyance, and for gamers who also do a lot of full-screen image editing, the VS-19's curved front glass might curve the corners of images somewhat. Still, in gameplay, this distortion isn't really palpable, and if you're looking for a bigger screen size and don't mind giving up some desk space in the bargain, take a look at the VS-19.

Price: $949
Vendor: KDS USA
(714) 379-5599
www.kdsusa.com

APPEAL: 15-inch monitor owners looking for a bigger picture.

PROS: Big, bright picture; good OSD controls.

CONS: Curved glass slightly distorts corners of display image; no INF file included.

CG LABS RATED ★★★½☆





Screen shot from *Outlaws*™ courtesy of LucasArts®

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★★☆☆☆ REVIEW • SC&T PER4MER RACING WHEEL

Button Overkill



by Loyd Case

If the ThrustMaster NASCAR Pro Racing Wheel represents an attempt at capturing realism in a driving controller, then SC&T's Per4mer Racing Wheel is pure fantasy. It's certainly not a believable steering wheel.

The first thing you notice are the garish decals that are meant to look like a dashboard. Speed Racer's dashboard may look like this, but I much prefer the spare appearance of the ThrustMaster wheel—after all, in most racing games I've driven, the dashboard shows up on the screen.

The next thing you notice are the buttons. There are a lot of them, 15 in all. To its credit, SC&T ships a pair of DirectInput drivers that work with the wheel in either 4-button mode (supporting most games) or 15-button mode (for games that allow controls to be reconfigured). Too bad the 15-button mode doesn't work well. I could never get the hat/pad gizmo to work properly, despite repeated calibration attempts.

After getting past the wheel, I moved on to the pedals, which need to be plugged into a special connection on the wheel. I actually liked the pedals quite a bit. For one thing, they're large, with a big platform that allows easy foot placement (there is even a heel rest) and prevents the pedals from sliding around on a carpeted surface. Other makers of driving controls could learn from SC&T's pedals.

Once I got past the installation hurdles, gameplay commenced. I ran through parts of NEED FOR SPEED II and I-76 with the Per4mer. This wheel doesn't feel as light as the CH wheel, but it's not as stiff as the Thrusty, either. It autocenters nicely, but the placement of the buttons generates a lot of confusion when you're actually playing. There are no programming tools; you must count on the game having reconfigurable controls. The base is big, so you need a lot of desk space. Also, the suction cups tend to pop out of the base during gameplay. Maybe a little superglue is in order?

The SC&T Per4mer isn't a bad wheel, but it's certainly not a standout. If you can live with the poor button placement and driver headaches, then this could be a lower-cost alternative to the NASCAR Pro Wheel—if realism isn't your bag.

Price: $99.95
Vendor: SC&T International
(602) 368-9490
www.platinumsound.com

APPEAL: Someone looking for a low-cost wheel with a lot of buttons.

PROS: Nice foot-pedal design; light, yet precise, autocentering.

CONS: Buttons here, buttons there, buttons everywhere; DirectInput driver is buggy.

CG LABS RATED ★★☆☆☆



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KESMAI STUDIOS

CG Choice Games This Month



Close Combat II: A Bridge Too Far p. 218



Myth: The Fallen Lords p. 212



"People who fly everywhere in their homes need jumping platforms and vanishing bridges like a snake needs wheels."

—*Scorpio, reviewing* Lands of Lore: Guardians of Destiny

CGW Coaster of the Month



Ultima Online p. 162

HOW DO WE RATE?

We review only finished products, not prerelease versions. The ratings are as follows:

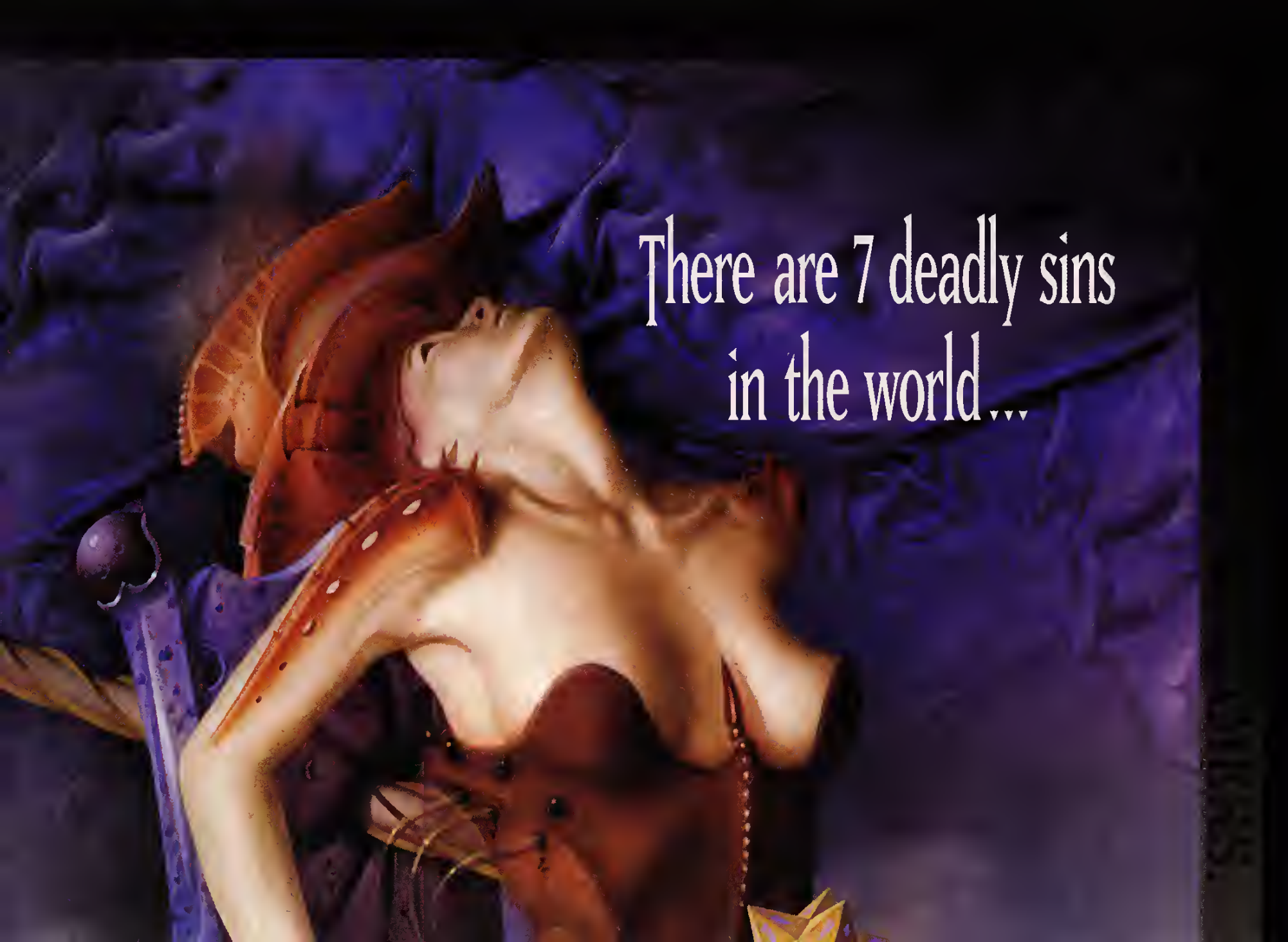
Outstanding: The rare game that gets it all right. The graphics, sound, and gameplay come together to form a Transcendent Gaming Experience. Our strongest buying recommendation.

Very Good: A high-quality game that succeeds in many areas. It may have minor problems, but is still worth your money, especially if you're interested in the subject matter or genre.

Average: A mixed bag. It can be a game that reaches for the stars, but falls short in several ways. It can also be a game that does what it does well, but lacks flair or originality.

Weak: A game with serious problems. Usually buggy, seriously lacking in play value, or just a poorly conceived game design—you should think long and hard before buying it.

Abysmal: The rare game that gets it all wrong. This is reserved for those products so buggy, ill-conceived, or valueless that you wonder why they were ever released in the first place.


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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: EASY / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

The Odd Squad

A Charming New Cast of Characters Arrives on the PC

by Ken Brown

It's easy to fall in love with ABE'S ODDYSEE, but don't go running off to get married without a second look. Yes, it's beautiful, funny, and full of personality, but be prepared to have to prove your worth over and over again before getting any special privileges. Like the ability to save, for instance. More on that later.

If you haven't seen it, ABE'S ODDYSEE is a side-scrolling platform game with several innovative twists. Tired of stereotypical heroes? You play a skinny little wretch named Abe, a Mudokon slave at the Rupture Farms meat processing plant. To add insult to injury, Abe's mouth is sewn shut. In the introductory animation, he makes a horrifying discovery. Rupture Farms will soon be turning Mudokons into packaged food treats. As you might expect, Abe's work ethic tapers off pretty dramatically at that point.



SLIG BOMBING After picking up some grenades from the "Boom" machine, Abe lobs one onto an unsuspecting Slig below

The intro segues perfectly to the start of the game. Throughout, the designers have succeeded in integrating the cut-scenes almost seamlessly with the gameplay sequences, which goes a long way toward preserving the consistency of the game world.

As the game begins, Abe is on the lam, trying to escape from Rupture Farms while rescuing as many of his fellow Mudokons as possible. You control Abe with the usual complement of platform moves such as running, jumping, crouching, and rolling. My favorite move is sneaking, which lets Abe creep by guards without being noticed—a great tactic and a real treat to watch.

GAMESPEAK

Abe can also talk, which is a pretty exciting innovation in this kind of game. He's not a chatterbox, but his vocabulary is just large enough to give him a kind of personality. The designers call this feature GameSpeak, and they provide an interface to help you practice his abilities. Abe can say "Hello," "Follow me," and "Wait." He can also hiss, whistle, fart, and laugh. Not bad for a guy who's mouth is stitched tight.

His speech is not only amusing, it's necessary for advancing in the game. Early on, you'll need to get other slaves' attention by saying "Hello" and "Follow me." Later, some of the puzzles require Abe to whistle and fart on cue. (Parental advisory: This function is capable of keeping a youngster amused for hours, if you can stand the sound of incessant flatulence.)

Abe has one other speech command: chanting. It can vary, but the main purpose of chanting is to possess an evil Slig. Sligs are funny-looking robotic guards with bad tempers and nasty machine guns. When Abe possesses one, the Slig cries out "Ow!" runs around feebly, and then falls under Abe's command. At that point you can control the Slig for as long as you like, experimenting with his amusing vocabulary and using him to ventilate all his friends.

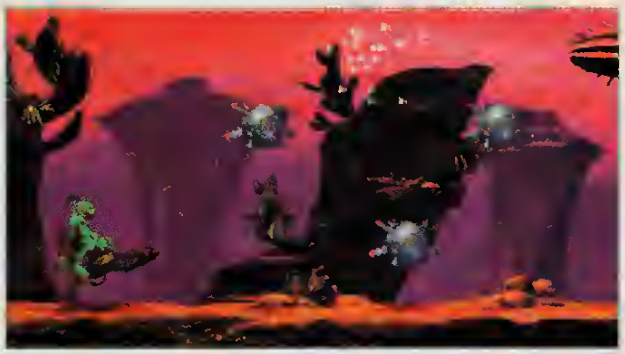
As with Abe, the Slig's speech ability isn't just for fun. Sometimes you'll need the Slig to yell "Watch out!" to nearby Mudokons, or they'll die in the ensuing firefight. At other times, you'll have to repeat a supervisor's speech into a console before the supervisor will deactivate an electric field. But the most fun I had was while making a Slig search for his Slog (guard dog). You force the Slig to walk around yelling, "Here, boy, here, boy!" and when the Slog finally appears, you pump him with lead and make the Slig laugh. Then you walk the Slig over a cliff and make Abe laugh. Now *that's* entertainment.

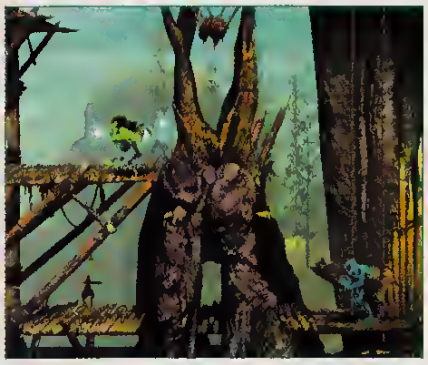
HOW ODD

Oddworld—the game environment—is an exquisitely detailed and organically consistent virtual world. The world has been painstakingly designed and rendered, and although you navigate Abe along a 2D plane, the environment's depth isn't totally lost, as in most platform games. At various points a cinematic cut-scene changes the field of view, bringing distant features into focus as the new plane of action. At other times the action can occur on more than

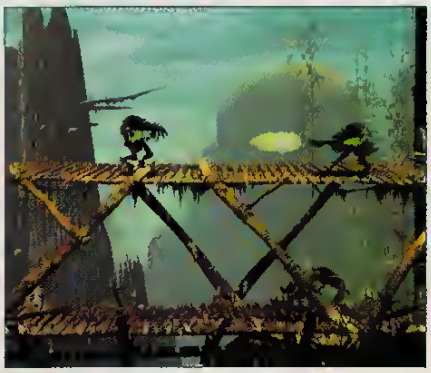


Price: $44.99
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 120 (Pentium 166 recommended), 16MB RAM, SVGA-graphics, 4x CD-ROM drive, Windows 95-compatible sound card (Sound Blaster-compatible for DOS)
Multiplayer Support: None.
Designer: Oddworld Inhabitants
Publisher: GT Interactive
New York, NY
(800) 610-4847
www.oddworld.com
www.gtinteractive.com





MINE JUMPING Nearly every screen has a set designer's flair for the dramatic. Here, Abe and Elum size up a gauntlet of rotating mines



POSSESSION Here's what it looks like when Abe possesses a Slig. You can then make the Slig walk around and drill all his little buddies.

one plane along the z-axis. Oddworld Inhabitants (the developers) obviously spent a lot of time rendering a realistic-looking world. The company intends to reuse it in the ODDWORLD "Quintology," the five-game series of which ODDYSEE is the first part.

There are seven distinct environments here, each offering different challenges. You'll have to overcome a variety of objects, such as bombs, motion sensors, meat saws, and falling debris, all the while fending off attacks from bizarre creatures. You'll die frequently, but the game restores Abe automatically to a recent screen.

The puzzles are easy at first but become fiendishly clever and more complicated. (See our tips for winning in this month's Gamer's Edge.) The only actual weapon Abe will ever have, apart from a gun-toting Slig, is a hand grenade. Most of the time all Abe has to work with is a rock or a piece of meat, and you have to figure out how to use them to defeat your enemies. The puzzles are not only challenging, they're also thoroughly consistent with the game world.

Fortunately, Abe isn't entirely alone in his mission. He has the occasional support of allies throughout the game to confer special knowledge or power to him. There are Mudokons, a powerful shaman known as Bigface, and a special creature called Elum. Elum ("mule" spelled backward) is an endearing beast who responds to Abe's voice commands and allows Abe to ride him, which comes in handy for making big jumps. The only liability Elum poses is that he's prone to distraction when eating honey. This becomes a puzzle in itself as you try to separate him from his favorite food. Fortunately, where there's honey, there are also bees . . .

AT ODDS

I've covered only a few of the game's many terrific qualities. As you can tell, I was charmed and delighted by its personality and wonderful sense of humor. I'd love to recommend ABE'S ODDYSEE to anyone—but I can't. You see, the game has a terrible secret.

ODDWORLD was designed by people who love console games. And most console games are designed to make you play all the way through a level before saving. You have to finish the entire level, then you get a code, then you advance. Only trouble is, computer gamers have different expectations and tolerance levels. Rather than forcing ourselves through a QUAKE or JEDI KNIGHT level all at once, we like to save the game after particularly difficult parts to minimize repetition. In ODDYSEE, you can save at any time, but the actual save points are at predetermined locations in the game. This means that you might save near the end of a difficult level, but if the game's nearest predetermined save location is at the beginning of that level, you'll have to play through the whole thing again anyway. Since the interval between these points is usually several screens long, the game requires that you perfectly execute up to 10 puzzle-filled screens before being able to advance to the next save point. Failure means repeating the process, ad nauseum, until you get it right. To make matters worse, some of these puzzles won't just be physical moves, they'll be speech puzzles. So you'll have to hear and repeat back a series of whistles and farts dozens of times until you're able to progress beyond a certain sequence. I had to repeat the most difficult sequences more than 100 times, and though I may be slower than you, I wouldn't recommend buying ABE'S ODDYSEE unless you can tolerate repetition and have plenty of time on your hands.

If it wasn't for this major flaw, I would recommend ABE'S ODDYSEE to any action or adventure gamer. It's loaded with humor, personality, and charm, and the story and puzzles are enough for experienced gamers to sink their teeth into. If the designers provide a more versatile save feature for the next four editions in the series, I see a bright future for Abe and his Oddworld friends.

APPEAL: Anyone who prefers puzzle-solving to fast, violent action.

PROS: Beautiful graphics and design; interesting characters; wonderful sense of humor; GameSpeak.

CONS: Extremely repetitive play; save-game feature is restricted to certain areas; cannot load from the Escape screen.

CG RATED ★★★★

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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: EASY / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

Bloody Mess

Take Away the Controversy and You Have a Mediocre Game

by Scott A. May

Where there's smoke, there's usually fire. Prerelease hype for Ripcord's debut game, POSTAL, blew plenty of smoke at both consumers and the press, hoping to fuel a firestorm of controversy. So far, it's worked. Once you get past the hype, though, the game reveals itself to be lukewarm at best.

The game's backstory is purposely left to the player's own twisted imagination. You assume the role of a disgruntled citizen known as Postal Dude, who pops a cork after being evicted from his house. Your heavily armed character then lets out his frustrations on the entire town—he "goes postal."

RAMPAGE

The game unfolds in an isometric perspective as you wreak havoc across 16 increasingly hostile locations. Settings include peaceful neighborhoods, downtown parades, trailer parks, train stations, urban ghettos, and industrial parks. If your Kevlar vest holds out, the game culminates in a rather shocking showdown at an Air Force base.

Gameplay is delightfully demented at first, as you wax victims who die screaming, often begging for mercy. "Kill me now!" or "I can't breathe!" they wail. In a twist of sick compassion, you can actually stand over their riddled flesh and pump a few last mercy shots into their heads. Likewise, when you can't take anymore, you can always insert the barrel into your own mouth.

BEYOND POOR TASTE

Designed with juvenile delight by Running With Scissors, POSTAL is both a parody of video-game violence and an excellent example of our desensitized perception of entertainment. Some will find POSTAL hilarious, others will find it downright sickening. Give Ripcord some credit for chutzpah—the company doesn't just push our moral hot button, it smashes it to smithereens. The game dares us to find pleasure in the cold-blooded murder of innocent people.



PROTEST THIS In a parody of POSTAL's real-life controversy, protesters of video-game violence outside the Running With Scissors office are "greeted" by Postal Dude.

From a pure gaming standpoint, however, POSTAL holds only limited play value. The level designs are imaginative, and the weapon selection—including machine guns, shotguns, spray cannons, heat-seeking missiles, napalm, and flame throwers—are well implemented. But in the long haul, even the most jaded arcade gun-freak will find the game repetitive and dull.

The game does its best to ensure long-term playability, with a host of single-player variations, such as timed levels, body count goals, checkpoints, and capture-the-flag scenarios. Multiplayer games—over modem, IPX, or the Internet—also help liven things up. But when all is said and done, the simple-minded carnage at the heart of the game becomes a worn-out novelty.

PUZZLING GRAPHICS

Graphics are good and bad. On the plus side, the game's hand-drawn backdrops are varied and elaborate. Artistically, however, these watercolor-style backgrounds look like the classroom doodlings of a bored seventh-grader.

Character animations are simplistic and skate erratically above the 2D framework. Character interaction with the environment is almost nonexistent. Fires that burn in one scene are instantly extinguished when scrolled out of camera view. Had the designers let players interactively vent their rage on structures in the game world, the game would have had more appeal.

The game does have its share of sadistic eye candy, such as victims who spew arterial blood while clawing the ground in agony. Players with DirectX-compatible video cards will also enjoy transparency effects in explosions, fire, and smoke.

Overall, the only envelope POSTAL pushes is that of good taste. Otherwise, it's merely a routine shooter designed to delight the commonly morbid minds of preteen boys.



Price: $54.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 90 (P166 recommended), 16MB RAM (32MB recommended), Windows 95/NT or Mac OS, 64MB hard-drive space, 2x CD-ROM drive (4x recommended), SVGA graphics, Win 95-compatible 8-bit sound card (16-bit recommended)
Multiplayer Support: Modem (2 players), LAN, Internet (2–16 players)
Designer: Running With Scissors
Publisher: Ripcord Games, Santa Clara, CA, (408) 653-1897
www.ripcordgames.com

APPEAL: Shoot-'em-up fans with a bent sense of humor.

PROS: Good selection of single- and multiplayer game variables; built-in level editor; elaborate hand-drawn 2D backdrops.

CONS: Simplistic character animation; repetitive gameplay; cheesy marketing efforts.

CGW RATED

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JT Chance -GrpW-> -----: It shredded my gyro!

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Stone -GrpW-> -----: I'm gonna need help

- who's left?

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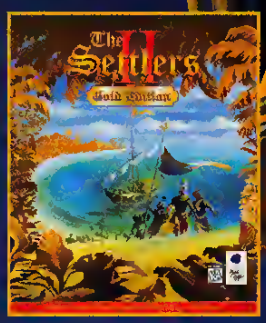
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Blue Byte

Poor Man's Quake





by Mark Clarkson

The format is familiar; the plot, as usual, is irrelevant. CHASM: THE RIFT is a first-person shooter that covers plenty of stock territory. There are monsters everywhere, and it's your job to clean house with the customary mix of weapons: chain-guns, grenades, mines, and the occasional lightning-firing superweapon. As usual, you'll find health, weapons, and ammo lying around on the floor.

Where CHASM distinguishes itself is in its 3D polygonal monsters—they are the best I've seen in a 3D shooter. They are well-animated, moving as if they actually have mass. More striking, though, is the way they take damage.

With careful aim, you can blow off a monster's arm. That may slow him down, but it won't stop him: He'll still punch you with the other hand. Shoot his other arm off and he'll start kicking until you put one in his brain.

While the monsters are state of the art, the rest of CHASM feels dated. The levels are wonderfully textured and fairly interactive—you can shoot out lights and windows—but very 2D. There are no rooms on top of rooms. The sound and mouse controls are a bit flaky, but the frame-rate is smooth on a P133 or P266.

CHASM supports network play in either deathmatch or cooperative mode, but cooperative play prevents you from actually working through the levels together. The level design is solid, though not terribly original—just like the entire game.



STRADDLING THE MIDDLE CHASM uses 3D for its cool monsters, but adheres to a dated 2D-look for its levels.

APPEAL: DOOM fans whose machines aren't up to QUAKE.

PROS: Wonderful, realistic 3D monsters; solid level-editor included.

CONS: There's nothing here we haven't seen before; too many bloody chunks for those who are squeamish.

CG RATED

Price: $34.99
Minimum System Requirements: 486 DX4/100, Windows 95 or DOS 5.0, 16MB RAM
Multiplayer Support: Modem (2 players), LAN
Publisher: GT Interactive (612) 559-5301
www.chasm3d.com

Wizard of Blahs





by Robert Coffey

MAGESLAYER's typically unoriginal plot boils down to killing everything in sight while dodging various traps. Basically TAKE NO PRISONERS with some half-baked fantasy, it's a top-down shooter that rehashes the genre's worst elements.

You can play as one of four characters, but gameplay is unaffected by your choice. Visually, MAGESLAYER is crisp and smooth, provided you have a 3Dfx card. Even with one, there's a slight but noticeable hit in frame rate when large animated objects fill the game screen.

Unlike TNP, MAGESLAYER is stunningly stingy in variety. All five game worlds are populated by the same few monsters, mostly the tired giant scorpion, spider, and rat types. It gets worse. Each character has one measly melee attack and three ranged spells, all of which have an indistinguishable "powered" version.

Like other subpar games, MAGESLAYER makes the mistake of confusing lots of enemies with challenging gameplay. Monsters attack in huge hordes that, though easy to kill, force you into tedious mouse-clicking.

MAGESLAYER is filled with traps you've seen a thousand times. To be fair, the game does go beyond the traditional power-up caches by offering some entire gauntlet-running secret levels.

Ultimately, MAGESLAYER is a study in limitations, unredeemed by the tacked-on multiplayer options.



THE GANG'S ALL HERE MAGESLAYER, with its paltry and uninspired five worlds, is even less fun than its cousin, TAKE NO PRISONERS.

APPEAL: TAKE NO PRISONERS fans who don't mind a much less interesting game.

PROS: Crisp, smooth graphics with 3Dfx card; lots to kill; secret levels.

CONS: Incredibly repetitive gameplay; no variety or originality in spells, characters, game worlds, traps, melee attacks, and gameplay.

CG RATED

Price: $44.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 90, Win 95, 16MB RAM
Multiplayer Support: Modem, null modem (2 players), LAN (2–16 players).
Publisher: GT Interactive (716) 871-6646
www.gtinteractive.com

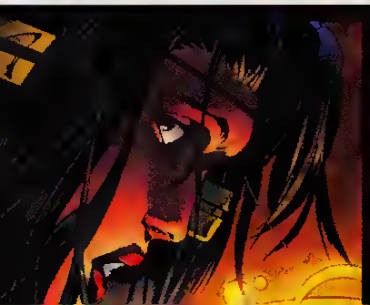
We took a perfectly good strategy game and threw in a few curves.

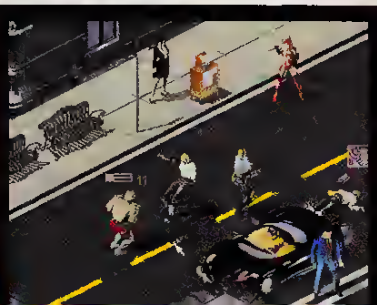
Go ahead and stare. You've never seen anything like *Guardians: Agents of Justice*™. Never before has a game so expertly mixed resource management and intense superheroic battle. Never before has the army in a strategy game been a handful of mutant, superbuff enforcers out to save tomorrow's planet from its own scum. And never before have there been such shapely superheroes, as easy on the eyes as they are rough on the rib cage. *Guardians: Agents of Justice* is the superhero strategy game where you call the shots. You can even customize your own mighty saviors, in case ours fail to meet your needs. (Somehow, we doubt it.)



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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

Rising Fun

A Lot of Action and Only a Little Strategy

by Robert Coffey

Forget 3DO's claim that UPRISING is another entry in the real-time strategy wars—it's an action title, pure and simple, with the merest smattering of strategy. But who cares? With its challenging missions and absorbing gameplay, UPRISING is a real treat.



REAL-TIME ACTION UPRISING is deeper than most action shooters, but less cerebral than traditional real-time games.

HI-TECH SLUGFEST

While UPRISING has customizable quick-start missions and an excellent tutorial, the heart of the game is its bruising campaign mode, which casts gamers as part of a rebel faction battling the evil intergalactic Imperium. Piloting a roving command center *uber*-tank, called a Wraith, you'll seize control of power-rich "hot zones" in order to build citadels, unit buildings, and defenses.

While you can call in units to do your dirty work, deft use of the Wraith's impressive destructive capabilities is the key to success in UPRISING. In addition, you can jump between your Wraith and the nearest citadel to seize the citadel's guns and take on invaders. Regrettably, you cannot seize control of any of your other units.

BEST LAID PLANS

RED ALERT base-building gurus, lured by empty promises of a strategy game, are bound to be let down by the paucity of units and command options. There are only four types of units, and an inability to direct them beyond the basic "Shoot that" command further restricts strategy. If UPRISING has a strategy element, it is in forcing gamers to adjust their approaches in order to defeat the Imperium on a mission-by-mission basis. Some planets emphasize defense, some require swift brutal attacks, and others reward a methodical approach. Dealing with the distinctive terrain of each planet heightens the challenge. You'll face lakes of lava; treacherous, sheer cliffs, and rolling hills that conceal blisters containing punishing turrets.

Battles are teeth-gritting spectacles of utter mayhem. Throw in the fact that your own bases may get attacked right when you're in the middle of an onslaught elsewhere—which forces you to manage multiple battles while dodging Imperium missiles—and keeping plates spinning starts to look easy.



THE BIG PICTURE You'll do all your base building and management from this satellite view.

UPRISING FALLS DOWN

As enjoyable as UPRISING is, it has some significant shortcomings. A game this tough should have a way to adjust the difficulty of the missions. The inability to customize the joystick controls is a shame, considering that the default controls of mouse and keyboard are awkward. In the overhead satellite view, the cursor is so tiny you can't find it (especially during a battle), and a few missions have a tendency to lock up your computer. Oh, and good luck trying to play a friend via a direct connection or the Internet—both are plagued with player-dropping bugs. Internet play also has latency problems.

Finally, most of the mission objectives are the same—take over all the citadels. They're tough, but they get repetitive. Why are there no night missions? What about defensive or infiltration missions?

Still, UPRISING is a blast. If Cyclone Studios had only thrown in the strategy they promised, UPRISING could have been a ground-breaker.



Price: $49.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 90 (Pentium 133 recommended), Windows 95, 16MB RAM (32MB recommended), 100MB free hard-drive space, 2x CD-ROM drive (4x recommended), SVGA video card, Sound Blaster-compatible sound card, Microsoft-compatible 2-button mouse; 3Dfx accelerator card strongly recommended.
Multiplayer Support: Direct connect, modem (2 players), LAN, Internet (2–4 players)
Designer: Cyclone Studios
Publisher: 3DO
Redwood City, CA
(650) 261-3000
www.3do.com

APPEAL: Action gamers with a taste for some very light strategy.

PROS: Mix of bruising action and challenging missions make for great gameplay; dynamic game worlds that affect play; much bigger scope than that of other shooters.

CONS: May be too hard for some; no strategic depth; mission goals seldom vary; clumsy controls; buggy modem and Internet play.

CG RATED ★★★★


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All-American Blast

by Rusel DeMaria





If you're feeling destructive, yet morally upright, NUCLEAR STRIKE will let you land a blow for the good of all democratic nations while causing an ungodly amount of destruction to evil world-dictators.

You'll pilot a variety of well-armed choppers and a few destructive ground vehicles, such as the hovercraft and the Abrams battle tank. The World War III storyline unfolds nicely as you fire at identified targets and some unexpected enemies. You'll also fly over hidden enemy encampments or hostile boats on the rivers and oceans. From the moment you boot up the game, you'll find there is plenty to do.

The beauty of NUCLEAR STRIKE is its ability to combine resource management, strategy, and a sense of a realistically unfolding adventure with a challenging action product. In regard to graphics, the game is satisfying. While your enemies often look comical and cartoonlike, the various enemy vehicles and gun emplacements are more realistic—they inspire dread as you watch their turrets swinging around to point your way.

The story is presented in quick cutscenes and short video sequences.

For the most part, the game gives more than adequate feedback and allows enough customization to make it satisfying for players of all skill levels.

In the end, NUCLEAR STRIKE manages to be a fascinating, challenging, and varied experience with plenty of gameplay to justify the price of admission.



NUCLEAR BLAST This screen shows several of the configurable options, and the pyrotechnics, that make NUCLEAR STRIKE fun to play.

APPEAL: Action fans, especially followers of the STRIKE series, who like some story and strategy.

PROS: Great graphics that simulate a 3D landscape; nonstop action; combination of compelling story and high-intensity action.

CONS: Objectives sometimes confusing; story can be sometimes unclear.



Price: $49.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 133 (P90 with 3Dfx), Windows 95, 16MB RAM
Multiplayer Support: None
Publisher: Electronic Arts
(415) 571-7171
www.ea.com

A Pirate's Life for PC

by Matthew Schaefer





High on the seven seas, the scurvy pirate Blowfleet has wreaked his havoc for far too long. As a rival pirate with a thirst for adventure, you must capture this renegade and take his treasure and glory from him.

The world of SHIPWRECKERS!, however, is not a serious one. It offers lighthearted shooting action with plenty of humor. Most of the gameplay consists of navigating through inlets, spits, and locks in pursuit of floating bottles that open up new map areas. This introduces a puzzle element to the game.

You'll blow through ships, flamethrowers, and bomb-dropping parrots on your way to raising the Jolly Roger over enemy ports. Your galleon can also be transformed into an airship, get trapped in giant air bubbles, become a speedy steamship, and gain a number of extra weapons—such as surface-to-air missiles—to supplement your cannons.

SHIPWRECKERS! requires the use of a 3D accelerator, but the graphics are impressive. Although the camera angle is movable, the default isometric view provides the best shots of the action.

The only annoying aspect of SHIPWRECKERS! is the console-style game saving. Players start with three ships (lives), but can save only after completing a level. This limited save option tried my patience, as I had to replay levels again and again.

Despite this, SHIPWRECKERS! provides console-style gaming with a refreshing dose of wackiness. SHIPWRECKERS! can provide you with seafaring excitement as few other games can.



AVAST! A sturdy galleon has raised the Jolly Roger over a looted town.

APPEAL: Action fans and would-be pirates who want some humor in their swashbuckling.

PROS: Interesting puzzles and challenging enemies; imaginative power-ups and ship transformations; good-looking 3D graphics; humorous atmosphere.

CONS: Annoying save-game feature necessitates tiring replay of levels.



Price: $50
Minimum System Requirements: P133, Win 95, 16MB RAM, 3D accel.card,
Multiplayer Support: Linked joystick/gamepad (2–5 players).
Publisher: Psygnosis
(800) 438-7794
www.psygnosis.com

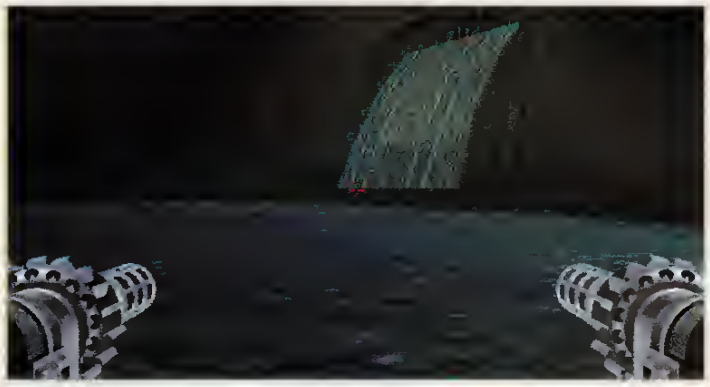
DIFFICULTY LEVEL: EASY / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

Fun-Defying Action

Avalon Hill's Action Premiere Descends Into the Clone Caverns

by Thierry Nguyen

It's hard to break into the action game genre. You either have a product with the requisite revolutionary feature or you have a derivative product that disappears into mediocrity. Avalon Hill's first action game, DEFIANCE, falls into the latter category. While the game has some good ideas and features, a few factors pull it down from the tier of innovation and reduce it to nothing more than a DESCENT clone.



BIGGER THAN NIAGARA There's Direct3D support, but it's not used very effectively.

ALIEN WAR MACHINE

DEFIANCE's plot is an attempt at sci-fi mystery. You are a test pilot for an experimental fighter craft to be used in an intergalactic war. When your base is attacked, you have to root out the culprits and punish them. Most of the game is spent unraveling the mystery of the base attackers. Once you do, the game becomes a simple matter of saving yourself by destroying all enemies.

The plot moves along via voiceovers and cut-scenes between the 13 levels. The cut-scenes aren't very impressive, but I like the use of voiceovers to further the plot. Though the technique is a far cry from the FMV in JEDI KNIGHT, it's a definite step beyond the text treatment used in other games.

ROBOTS VS. ROBOTIC CRITTERS

Though DEFIANCE is like DESCENT, the main difference between the two is that in DEFIANCE your ship doesn't naturally defy gravity. There is no rolling or hovering; you have to use vertical thrust to "hop" around. It felt as if I was controlling a robot rather than a spacecraft. The weapons are divided into guns and missiles—most of which are stock shooter-fare.

The enemies—all biomechanical monstrosities—boast nice animation, but are themselves unimpressive. Their colors are monotonous, and they always seem to use the simple AI routine of "guns from a distance, headbutt when close."



THOSE WACKY ALIENS The enemies feature nice animation, but as a whole, they aren't very memorable or very impressive

NO X TO MARK THE SPOT HERE

The level design resembles real locations, such as cityscapes and laboratories, which are better than the confusing, claustrophobic mines of DESCENT. The flip side to this, though, is the lack of a map. This is aggravating, especially because the levels are huge and are composed of many similar-looking twists and tunnels.

Also, the graphics aren't terribly impressive. The use of Direct3D seems to be more for boosting frame rate than for adding visual effects—the graphics seem closer to the original DESCENT than to today's visually impressive games.

The save-game feature is odd; the game allows you to save only at certain computer consoles scattered throughout the levels. While that's not quite as bad as in DARK FORCES, it strikes me as stupid—especially considering that there's a cheat described in the READ.ME file that allows you to save whenever you want. Why should saving be a cheat, rather than an option?

In the end, DEFIANCE is an adequate start for Avalon Hill's new Visceral Productions action line. Some elements, such as the story-driving voiceovers, are nice, but the lack of a map, the less-than-stellar graphics, and the save-game "feature" end up making it just another DESCENT clone.



Price: $49.99
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 90, 16MB RAM, Windows 95, 40MB hard-drive space, 2x CD-ROM, VGA-graphics card, Windows 95-compatible sound cards
Multiplayer Support: Modem, serial (2 players), LAN (2–8 players)
Designer: Logicware
Publisher: Visceral Productions/Avalon-Hill Baltimore, MD (800) 999-3222
www.avalonhill.com

APPEAL: Gamers who dig DESCENT, but want something less claustrophobic and more mysterious.

PROS: Good attempt at using voiceovers to tie the plot together; good enemy animation.

CONS: Lack of automap; odd save-game feature; unimpressive graphics.

CG RATED ★★★½☆

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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: EASY / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

Uh-Oh

Origin's Epic Online Game Is Snared by Bugs and Design Problems



HIDE HARVEST Someone was tough enough to take on a herd of cows, but left their hides behind, probably due to the cowhide surplus.

by Thierry Nguyen



Price: $59.99 plus $9.95 per month
Minimum System Requirements: P133 or better, 16MB RAM, Windows 95, 261MB hard-drive space, 4x CD-ROM, SVGA graphics card, Windows 95-compatible sound card, Internet connection
Multiplayer Support: As many players as the server can hold
Designer: Origin
Publisher: Electronic Arts
San Mateo, CA
(800) 245-4525
www.origin.ea.com

It was perhaps the simplest, yet grandest design spec of any game to be released this year. To create a virtual world based on the world of Britannia. Not content with the simple online monster-thwacking of DIABLO, Lord British set out to create a virtual community with ULTIMA ONLINE. The vision involved creating a dynamic game world in which players were free to live their virtual lives; whether they be bakers or dragon-slayers. Essentially, ULTIMA ONLINE was to be a grand-scale, graphical multiuser dungeon (MUD). Unfortunately, despite the grandiose and well-meaning intentions, there are many factors that pull ULTIMA ONLINE down.

MULTIPLE AVATARS

ULTIMA ONLINE opens with a typically well-done Origin cut-scene that portrays the slaying of Mondain and the shattering of the Gem of Immortality. In each shard of the gem is a perfect replica of Sosaria, the game world of ULTIMA ONLINE.

Basically, this use of the "shards of Sosaria" plot is used to explain the multiple servers. As of this writing, there were six servers, five serving the various regions and one Test Server in which Origin experiments with proposed changes. When you sign up for an ULTIMA ONLINE account, you pay $9.95 a month to use up to five characters per server.

Character generation is a pretty quick affair. You select the three skills in which you want to excel, modify your stats, and then alter your appearance with options such as hair color, facial hair-style, and skin tone. Then, you give yourself a name and optional password, pick a town and inn to start in, and enter Britannia.

You start the game with 100 gold pieces and some basic equipment (based on which primary skills you selected). After that, you're on your own. There's no overarching goal, no Foozle to vanquish, no treasure to seek. Just enter the world and play your character as you see fit.

SUPER AVATAR BROTHERS, AGAIN?

At first glance, the game engine looks a lot like an SVGA-graphics version of the ULTIMA VIII engine. You get the 3/4 slanted view of the landscape, as in ULTIMA VIII or CRUSADER, rather than the more aerial perspective used in earlier ULTIMAS. You still have the staple movement interface of ULTIMA VII and beyond, in which you hold down the right button to walk about and double-left-click on items to use them. Thankfully, unlike ULTIMA VIII, there are no contrived platform-game–style puzzles. What we end up with is the graphically enhanced version of the ULTIMA VIII engine, only using the ULTIMA VII interface.

ULTIMA ONLINE is a skills-based game, which means that you improve your skills and stats by practicing. You can either receive training from NPCs or just take the time to practice your skill over and over again until it improves.

As of now, combat is also a clicking-affair, though it's not quite as frantic as DIABLO's combat. To fight something, you need to enter "combat" mode, and then double-click on your target. The



DEATH BECOMES ME When you die and come back as a ghost, the world goes black and white, and you're forced to wander the Earth until someone resurrects you.

various skills at play will be checked against each other, and you'll be notified on whether or not you made contact. Origin also wants to give the player an autocombat option, with which the player will select a predefined fighting style and the computer will then carry out combat, though this feature is not implemented yet.



TALKING HEADS Not only is text hard to read when it overlaps, but these NPCs spew out long paragraphs detailing quests, and then forget all about them moments later.

THE LAG DAEMON STRIKETH

So, after learning these essentials, you just need to sign on and go have yourself an adventure-filled virtual life, right? Not quite. Unfortunately, ULTIMA ONLINE has a host of problems and setbacks.

First, this article gives you just a bit less than what the game's documentation tells you. When you open the box, the first thing you notice is the lack of a real manual. Yes, you get a decent reference card and install guide, but no meaty manual. The only options for a manual are an online document on Origin's Web site or the strategy guide, which you have to buy separately.

When you install the game, you'll have to devote 261MB to the minimum install. Unfortunately, this runs quite slow. For smoother gameplay, you're going to have to give the game half a gig (so that the game runs off the hard drive instead of the CD).

Once you log on, you will invariably encounter the principle problem with the game: bugs. Origin is busy making patches and makes you download them when you sign on; it seemed that every time I logged on, I watched the "downloading/applying patch" screen do its work.

The bugs are perpetual, as every time some are fixed, new ones will pop up. For example, as of press time, Notoriety is still buggy. This means that I could kill an Orc that threatened to kill Lord British's mother, only to be marked as a "Dread Lord," yet I could gain the title of "Noble" by giving fish away. Other bugs include the ability to generate large amounts of money via cloning, and the ability to become an instant Grandmaster by paying an NPC to train you.

The other huge obstacle in this game is lag time. The smoothest gameplay came for me when I was playing in the wee hours of the night (about 2–3 a.m. PST). Whenever I played in the afternoon, the server was clogged, and not only did the lag time make my character teleport around the area, but it also booted me off with numerous server crashes.

DUMB AND DUMBER

There are some other game issues, as well. The NPCs are extremely moronic, as they will offer you quests and then forget about them moments later ("Go killeth Sir Davus," you'll be told. You then ask, "Where is Sir Davus?" The response: "I know not of what you speaketh, knave.")

Also, the economy is thrown off balance, due to the fact that everyone who has come before you has already killed all the creatures and filked the NPCs out of their money. The only way you can thwack some creatures is to wait for a creature to respawn or to move to a less populated area.

Practicing skills takes hours upon hours of clicking. If you thought DIABLO was a chick-fest, you haven't tried improving your swordsmanship by attacking practice dummies for three hours. And finally, player-killing ("PK'ing") is rampant. While PK'ing is actually a legitimate form of role-playing, the reason so many people do it is because it's much more fun than playing UO "the real way," in which you must do a series of monotonous/repetitive tasks in order to be strong enough to kill anything larger than a pig.

ULTIMA ONLINE is a game with untapped potential. The game has great aspirations, but is plagued by bugs, horrible lag-time, and some design issues. As of now, you should get ULTIMA ONLINE only if you are willing to put up with a whole lot of grief, all the time. If you simply want to go out and thwack creatures with friends, stick to DIABLO. If you have the patience to put up with the numerous changes and pitfalls of ULTIMA ONLINE, and would like to try living a "virtual" life, go ahead and try. As for me, I'll stick to real life for now.

Reviewing an Online Game

ULTIMA ONLINE is a hard game to review simply because it is constantly evolving. Because it is online, it is forever changing, both for better and for worse. There will always be bugs, and patches to fix those bugs, which create further bugs, and so on. By the time you read this issue, the game may have undergone a radical makeover.

As it stands now, based on what's in the box, the game's flaws outweigh its features. Yet there is so much potential that ULTIMA ONLINE *could* become a truly great game. But we can't review potential, we can only review concrete product. As of this writing, this is our position on ULTIMA ONLINE. Should the game go through a major overhaul and become a great online game, it will be addressed again later. You can count on *CGW* to keep you posted, should any monumental changes occur.

APPEAL: Patient gamers interested in graphical MUDs, or a "virtual community."

PROS: If played correctly, it can be a real role-playing experience; decent graphics.

CONS: Numerous and never-ending bugs; horrible lag-time; design issues lead to repetitive and time-consuming activities; unbalanced economy; ridiculously high system requirements.



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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE

Online Warfare Gets Deeper With MERIDIAN 59 REVELATION

by Barry Brenesal

Resting on your laurels is dangerous. They can easily turn into poison ivy, with painful results. With no serious competition, 3DO's popular MERIDIAN 59 has been doing just that as the preeminent graphical multiuser dungeon (MUD) for the last year. Now, with ULTIMA ONLINE out, and looming threats from Microsoft's ASHERON'S CALL and Sony's EVERQUEST, 3DO's producers have turned their attention back to MERIDIAN 59. But can their new REVELATION upgrade—and the promise of another soon to come—save MERIDIAN 59 from a MUDslide in popularity toward newer online games?

BODY SHOP

MERIDIAN 59 is set in a pseudo-medieval fantasy universe. You use magic and muscle to battle monsters. Along the way, you gather treasure, meet friends, and find fame; of course, occasionally you die.

Your character begins in the town of Raza, in a small, safe area set aside for new arrivals to learn the command set. MERIDIAN 59 lets you customize your character's appearance in regard to hair style, mouth shape, eye color, skin color, and gender. Finally, you apply 50 points against stats in six categories: might, intellect, stamina, agility, mysticism, and aim.

Unlike most of the competition, MERIDIAN 59 does not supply a mix of fantasy races and professions, so don't expect to unveil that Dark Elven Sorcerer you always wanted to be in your black heart of hearts. You customize your character by seeking out one of six schools, each of which offers unique benefits to the initiate who, over time, fulfills its numerous quests. The Temple of Shal'ille teaches healing, blessing, and protection spells, for instance, while Faren Temple instructs you in hard-to-control attack spells.

When your character eventually learns all the spells in a single school, you can choose another and follow a similar questing path, but the learning curve for new spells or improved weapons skills increases dramatically with each successive school you choose to affiliate with. While this admittedly prevents the development of supercharacters, it also places a ceiling on training, which can frustrate players who like aiming for that next spell or obscure talent that lies just over the magical horizon.



JUNGLE BOOGIE Nicely textured tropical forests add to REVELATION's atmosphere

KILLING TIME

To PK or not to PK, that is the next question. MERIDIAN 59 has a reputation as a player killer's paradise, and it's not without reason. The game's structure of clublike guilds encourages player conflict. With only 14 guilds allowed at any given time, many guild-wannabes organize infiltrations and assaults upon guild halls. The benefits of successful takeovers are too sweet to ignore: a private communications channel between all guild members, a building closed to all nonmembers (except by permission); a body of friends to provide instant rescue or support; and a guild chest to hold your surplus goods and keep them safe from loss, which usually occurs when you die.

Players who want to engage in a more sportsmanlike, one-on-one duel to the death typically frequent the combat-sanctioned zone of the Arena; but there's also a goodly share of nonconsentual PK'ing in MERIDIAN 59. The game's Dungeon Masters give this activity free rein outside a few safe areas, such as towns, since murdered players spawn Revenants, powerful AI-controlled critters that stalk their killers relentlessly until either the murderer or the Revenant dies. Since a murderer and his pals can band together to kill a Revenant, however, this isn't always an effective solution.

This MUD is not just about combat and death, though; MERIDIAN 59 offers a social atmosphere, with many cities



Price: $9.95 retail (with a week's worth of free sessions) or free download from 3DO's Web site (with no free sessions). Online charges: $2.49/day, $7.50/week (based on 4 days free after playing 3 days/week).
Minimum System Requirements: Windows 95, 486/66 or higher, 8MB RAM, 35MB hard-drive space, 2x CD-ROM drive, 14.4Kbps modem, SVGA-graphics monitor, SLIP/PPP Net connection.
Multiplayer Support: Duh.
Designer/Publisher: 3DO
Redwood City, CA
(650) 261-2777
www.3do.com

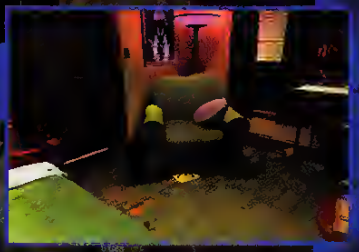

Black
Dahlia

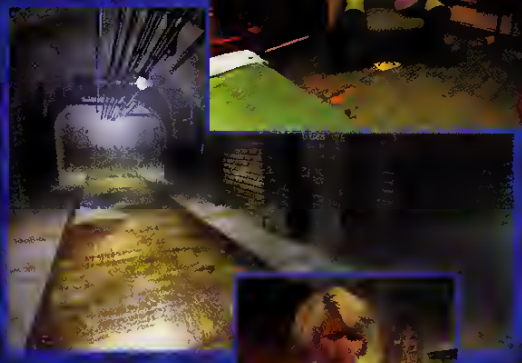












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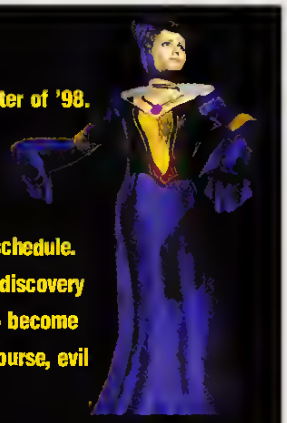
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More PK'ing Ahead

The next MERIDIAN 59 upgrade, titled RENAISSANCE, is expected in the second quarter of '98. It will apply the improved graphical capabilities of Ko'catan to MERIDIAN 59's two major cities, Tos and Raza. The engine that assigns quests to players will also be revised to permit on-the-fly changes. Expect a much greater diversity of quests, as well as penalties associated with timed quests that aren't completed on schedule.

RENAISSANCE will primarily focus on expanding the game's player-killing aspect. The discovery of a new region controlled by an evil, magically inclined Queen permits characters to become Necromancers, who gain powerful spells but need to kill other players regularly. Of course, evil spawns its opposite, and players will also be offered the choice of becoming Hunters, who have enhanced weapons and tracking skills—and are the destroyers of Necromancers.



NOT ALL THAT'S EVIL IS UGLY Here's a lich you can expect to meet in MERIDIAN'S RENAISSANCE module

and shops. This social atmosphere, however, would be improved if Dungeon Masters took more control over the names players were permitted to use in the game. On several recent occasions when I logged on, some of the most voluble players had names that were illegal drugs and sexual puns. Sure, you can block out their comments using your Options panel, but then you'd have to block out other players who refer to them, too. And there's no way to block out their physical presence.

MEET THE NEW BOSS

When MERIDIAN 59 was originally released in September 1996, its graphics could best be described as serviceable. Now, however, the game is visually dated. The washed-out, poorly textured images look flatter and more unappetizing than ever.

First and foremost, the new REVELATION module adds land mass to MERIDIAN 59—the world is suddenly 33 percent larger, thanks to the "recently discovered" tropical island of Ko'catan. The island also supplies more visual textures and contoured surfaces—its main population center is a fine example of city dwellings perched upon hilly slopes. Ko'catan is home to a hidden temple, covert passageways, mazelike catacombs, and attractively detailed forests. REVELATION features 30 new NPCs, intriguing puzzles, and plenty of critters.

Critter AI is improved, as well. Though we've yet to see anything in a multiplayer environment to match DRAGON REALMS' AI (in which monsters make intelligent battle decisions based upon such factors as spell capacity, health, physical footing, enemy distance, and numbers of friends and foes in the room), the monsters in REVELATION supply a greater diversity of personalities and strategies. For example, the three birdlike Avar tribes constantly war among themselves as well as against players, and the devastating effects of their Shamans' Earthquake spell should not be underestimated—even by veteran breakdancers.

There are great new spells in REVELATION, with a new school of magic and a general refurbishing of extant spells that brings the total number of spells to more than 100. One spell in particular deserves mention. Tame. Use it on an unintelligent monster you're fighting, and you may gain a large pet to follow you and fight your battles.



PLAY NICE The NPCs in REVELATION are moody—they will raise their prices if you annoy them

Overall, the changes made to MERIDIAN 59 in REVELATION—a larger world, significantly improved graphics, more varied quests and spells—really make a difference. On the eve of several important graphical multiplayer releases, this MUD provides competition that cannot be ignored. In the final analysis, MERIDIAN 59's social and role-playing aspects are given less structural emphasis than combat, and it's for combat that you should turn to this game. There are better MUD venues for role-playing and socializing, but few multiplayer games deliver as many well-structured opportunities for restless adventurers who want to work out their aggressions as does MERIDIAN 59.

APPEAL: Online multiplayer gamers, particularly combat-oriented ones.

PROS: Lots of spells to learn and critters to fight; a great quest system; large environment to explore; excellent interface; light on computer resources.

CONS: Strong PK (player-killer) element; online costs can sneak up on you.

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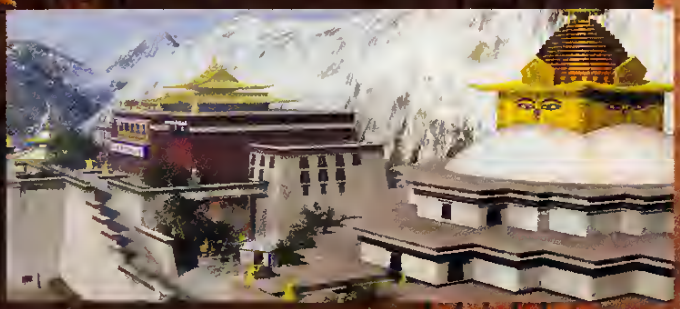
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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: EASY / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

The Bitter End

A Great Action/Adventure Hybrid—Until the Terrible Endgame

by Robert Coffey

While there have been action/adventure game hybrids since the days of IT CAME FROM THE DESERT, the last year has seen a boom in this niche. With games such as REALMS OF THE HAUNTING, TWINSEN'S ODYSSEY, and THE LAST EXPRESS, action/adventure hybrids seem to have come of age, and it's about time. Done right, the introduction of action elements to an adventure game only draws the player deeper into the story. The life and death struggles add an immediacy frequently lacking in traditional adventures. DARK EARTH is the latest entry into this burgeoning genre, and it's a winner—until a truly boneheaded endgame spoils it all.



TALL, DARK, AND SCABBY The contaminated Arkhan looks even more butt-ugly next to the beautifully rendered game environments.

WHO TURNED OUT THE LIGHTS?

DARK EARTH takes place in the aftermath of an apocalypse 300 years in Earth's future. According to the backstory, a gigantic comet passed too close to the planet, resulting in global decimation (courtesy of fiery meteorites). A thick pall of black soot immediately filled the air, plunging the world into constant, choking darkness. The few survivors wandered the planet for generations, battling fearsome creatures born of the perpetual night. They finally discovered a precious few islands where shafts of light cut through the smog. These raised cities, or stallites, became oases for mankind.

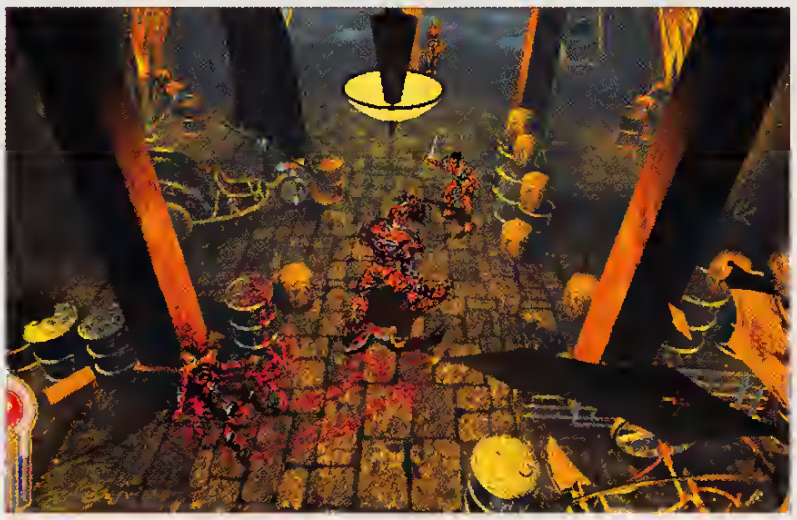
Thus saved, mankind started worshipping the sun as a god, led by holy Sunseers who were protected and aided by their militia, the Guardians of Fire.

You are cast as Arkhan, a member of the Guardians of Fire, and the son of one of the Sunseers. While saving the holiest Sunseer of Sparta from an assassination attempt, you are poisoned by a Konkolite. The very essence of the bitter darkness now courses through your veins, corrupting your body, mind, and soul. As the game hits its stride, you must find a cure while fighting the forces of darkness in order to save the planet.

The story in DARK EARTH is rich and compelling. Filled with betrayals, tragedy, and heroism, the plot fairly gallops along, introducing new characters and side plots as it drives the game forward. There is a sense of urgency in everything Arkhan does, abetted in no small part by the creeping progress of his disease, which worsens in realtime. It's an interesting combination—as game events are triggered by your actions, Arkhan's deterioration worsens. Fortunately, the disease moves slowly, and while it does keep you moving, it doesn't prevent you from completing the game.



Price: $48.99
Minimum System Requirements: Windows 95, Pentium 75, 8MB RAM (256-color gameplay with no background music); 4x CD-ROM drive, 60MB free hard-drive space, DirectX 5.0 compatible sound and video cards, mouse; gamepad supported.
Multiplayer Support: None
Designer: Kalisto Entertainment
Publisher: MicroProse Software
Alameda, CA 94501
(510) 522-1164
www.microprose.com



COME GET SOME As the darkness starts engulfing Sparta, Arkhan will have to fight hideous mutants in addition to simple humans gone bad.

WORLD OF RUIN

The world of DARK EARTH is an intriguing assortment of dichotomies. The regal splendor of Sparta stands in sharp contrast to the poverty of the Lower City. The primitive and scientific coexist. For instance, most weapons are swords and

daggers, yet there are simple guns to be found (although they are steam-powered).

The unique game world is beautifully rendered in screen after gorgeous screen. DARK EARTH's environments are lush and detailed, even in 256-color mode. More than mere eye candy, the game's rich design paints an imaginatively conceived reality that encompasses dank sewers, eerie underwater ruins, and the towering majesty of Sparta's temple. While there's some simple movement in the environments, the world is predominantly static and noninteractive.



20 FEET OR SO UNDER THE SEA While DARK EARTH's game world is relatively small, there's enough variety in locations that things never get stale.

DARK EARTH's animated cut-scenes are similarly outstanding. While not visually ground-breaking, these cut-scenes are easily the most exciting I've seen in a game. They push the action forward instead of just serving as a simple reward for a solved puzzle. The only problem I had with the cut-scenes is that they occasionally caused the game to crash.

Arkhan and the numerous NPCs he meets are polygonal 3D characters in a 2D world. While not as sharply drawn as their surroundings, the characters don't look glaringly out of place, although their movements occasionally seem awkward, particularly when characters go up or down stairs (they hover about an inch above every step). Also, Arkhan has a fairly large "tangle zone": He gets hung up on the edges of objects and walls rather easily.



PLEASED TO MEETCHA! Frequent interaction with NPCs such as this, um, "exotic dancer," named Delia, enrich and propel DARK EARTH's plot.

GETTING AROUND SPARTA

Arkhan can freely explore the world, with all movement options handled by an easy-to-master, though noncustomizable, combination of Shift, Ctrl, and arrow keys. A gamepad may also be used, though it also can't be customized. DARK EARTH's inventory system is simple and intuitive and allows you to assign numbers to up to nine weapons.

Saving games may be a sticking point for some gamers. Only nine games can be saved, they can't be named, and they can be saved only at certain locations. However, save points are liberally scattered about the game world, and gamers shouldn't find themselves replaying huge segments of the game if they save wisely and often.

Interacting with objects is a simple matter of maneuvering Arkhan to the desired object and hitting the space bar. Kalisto has added a twist though, with a "mood" meter that can be toggled between Arkhan's light (normal) and dark (contaminated) natures. Some things may be accomplished only if Arkhan is appropriately nasty, particularly when it comes to finding some objects. If searching a room is frustratingly fruitless, give in to the dark side and start angrily searching the place—odds are you'll find something.

DARK EARTH's gameplay is as effortless as its controls. In fact, the game bends over backward to keep things from getting too difficult. While gamers can control Arkhan in combat, simply holding down the Ctrl key in combat mode will let the computer do all your dirty work.

The puzzles in the game are generally inventory-based, logical, and tied into the story. The game keeps things simple by solving the more complicated puzzles for you. The game automatically assembles inventory items into new, necessary objects. It's great for beginning gamers, but annoying for gamers looking for more of a challenge.

THE BIG PROBLEM

So, if DARK EARTH is such an enjoyable, solid game, why are we giving it only 3.5 stars? Because the end of the game flat-out sucks. Kalisto really dropped the ball here. After the final save point, you have to work your way through a maze bristling with spinning blades, then fight a monster you can stun but not kill, all the while desperately trying to move some levers in some secret manner to get to the end of the game. Negotiating the maze is tough, if only because nothing in the game prepares you for the space bar's sudden ability to make Arkhan duck—I died a lot before finding out that one.

Also, the game needs a saving opportunity after the maze, since the boss at the end will kill you scores of times, which forces you to go through the maze again and again. And any game that expects you to figure out the correct sequence to pull some levers (without even an obscure hint) while some invincible beast pounds on your head has just failed Game Design 101. It's so frustratingly difficult that it ruins the game.

DARK EARTH has a lot going for it. It looks good, it sounds good, the story is great, and it's not too tough—perfect for beginners. But the ending is so disappointing you'll need lots of forgiveness in your heart to get over it.

APPEAL: Veteran gamers looking for a good story, beginning gamers looking for a good introduction, all with a saintlike ability to deal with the horrible ending.

PROS: Great plot and stunning graphics create an outstanding game world; easy controls; fantastic cut-scenes; smooth blend of adventure and action gaming.

CONS: Experienced gamers may find it too easy; sporadic crashes; steep system requirements for all features; the endgame may damage your monitor (when your fist goes through it).

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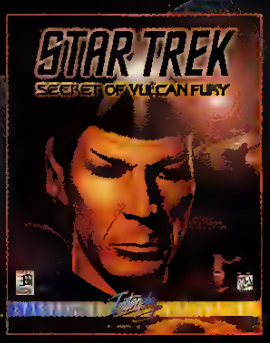


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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: EASY / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

Mystery Lesson

History Mixes With Murder for an Intriguing Adventure

by Allen Greenberg

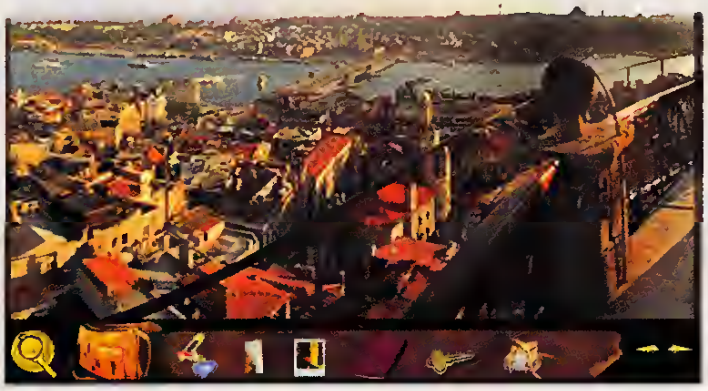
Strategically located near the Black Sea at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, Istanbul has enjoyed a colorful and often tempestuous history. It is that history, viewed through the eye of modern technology, which is the subject of BYZANTINE: THE BETRAYAL. A Discovery Channel Multimedia release, this intriguing adventure combines computer-generated graphics and live action

You play a reporter known for your keen eye and journalistic acumen, who becomes caught up in an investigation of stolen artifacts from historic sites in Istanbul. The game was "filmed" largely on location, and thus includes many of these sites. However, the live action forms only part of the game. The investigation leads you to an amazing computer simulation of some of the sites as they appeared several hundred years earlier. For example, there is a visit to the palace of Süleyman I, who ruled from 1520–66.

However, someone has sabotaged these simulations, possibly to hide the theft of hidden antiques. To repair the simulations, you "scan" the real sites as they exist today. The scans are then uploaded to a computer. You use the computer to sort them and assign them to their proper place as you visit a computer-generated fantasyland. Once the simulation has been repaired, you are free to explore the mazes and puzzles within. Remember, however, that someone else has already explored this simulated territory and removed the treasures that you will uncover. Your job is to find that person or persons. And, of course, while all of this is happening, a mysterious assassin is after your blood.

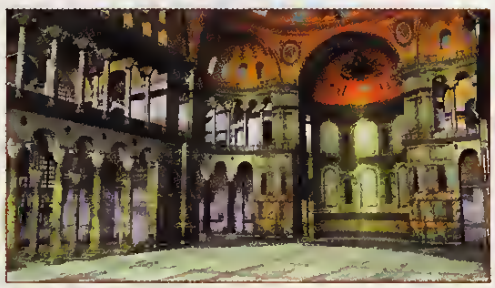
CHECK YOUR REFLEXES

The puzzles in BYZANTINE are not particularly difficult, although there are moments in the game when quick action is called for in order to escape death.



ISTANBUL (NOT CONSTANTINOPLE) BYZANTINE: THE BETRAYAL features beautiful scenes of modern-day Istanbul.

However, a convenient built-in function automatically saves your game just before the critical moment. You can then replay it until you get it right. There are moments, particularly in the endgame, when a bit more time to accomplish certain tasks would have been appropriate. Also, the view is inconsistent as you move from place to place, which can leave you disoriented and unsure of which way you're facing.



WAY-BACK MACHINE Interspersed with your travels through modern Istanbul are virtual re-creations of historic sites in the region's past.

Hints as to what to try next are also built into the game. They won't tell you everything, but they can be helpful at times. The plot is essentially linear, but there are many places to explore and people to talk to in the real world. Each time someone mentions a new location in Istanbul, that place appears on your map of the city. Before long, your map becomes quite full and you can visit any location on the map simply by clicking on it.

TROUBLE BOUND

Unfortunately, the game did not always run smoothly. At a certain point, key people in the story simply didn't show up — which essentially froze the game. Discovery insisted that BYZANTINE had been extensively tested, and it even provided saved games that circumvented the problem. Users should beware, however, that the potential for trouble exists.

BYZANTINE is not a classic game, and it has a few minor problems, but it should provide adventure lovers with some enjoyable hours before its conclusion.

APPEAL: Traditional adventure gamers, history buffs.

PROS: Intriguing story; skillful mixture of real life and computer-generated graphics.

CONS: Inconsistent views when moving from one place to another; some game bugs midway through game.

CG RATED ★★★★



Price: $49.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 90, Windows 95, 16MB RAM, 4x CD-RDM, Windows 95-compatible sound card, SVGA 16-bit color
Multiplayer Support: None
Publisher: Discovery Channel Multimedia
Distributor: Interplay
Irvine, Calif.
(714) 553-6655
www.interplay.com

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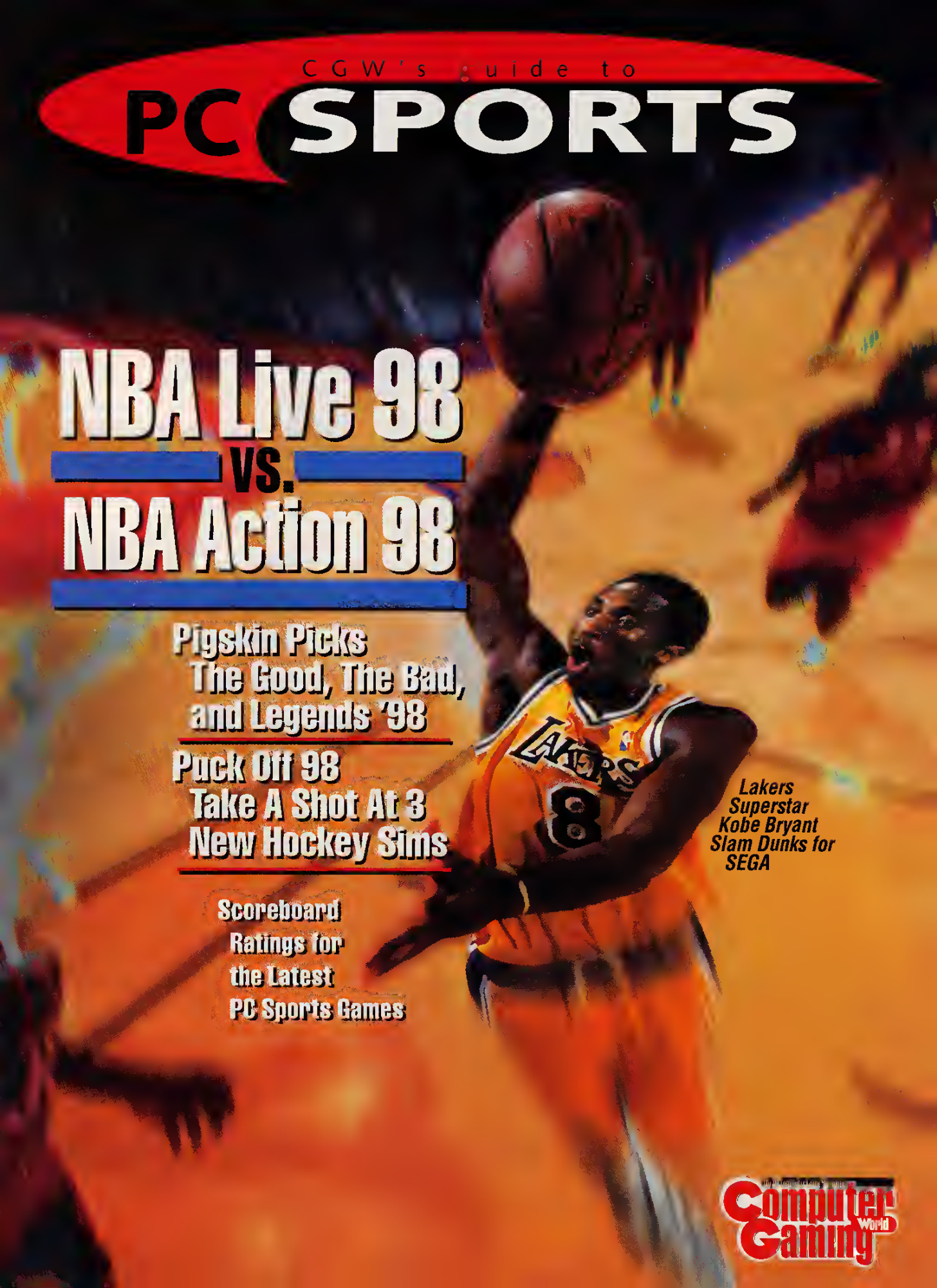
PC SPORTS

NBA Live 98 VS. NBA Action 98

Pigskin Picks The Good, The Bad, and Legends '98

Puck Off 98 Take A Shot At 3 New Hockey Sims

Scoreboard Ratings for the Latest PC Sports Games



Lakers Superstar Kobe Bryant Slam Dunks for SEGA

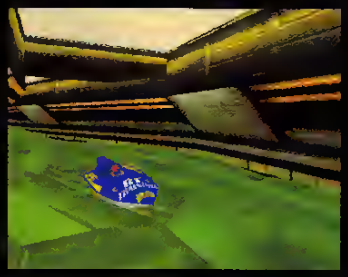
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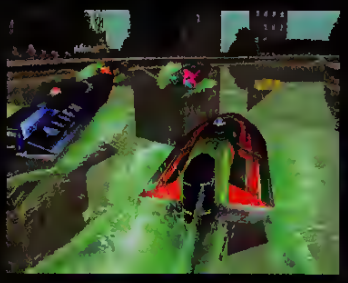
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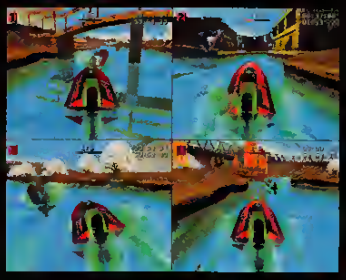
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KIDS TO ADULTS
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HOCKEY FACEOFF '98

Two Major Releases And One Small Hoot Take To The Digital Ice

by Gordon Goble

And the gloves are off!

It's been a long wait, but EA Sports' all-dominant NHL HOCKEY series finally has some worthy competition in the battle for Lord Stanley's Digital Mug. It comes in the form of Virgin Interactive's NHL POWERPLAY '98, the second installment of the title designed by Radical Entertainment (BRETT HULL HOCKEY 95).

Radical has gone the 3D route this time around, adding some glossy oomph to the lovely artificial intelligence of their first effort, last year's NHL POWERPLAY 96. Meanwhile, EA's hot-off-the-press NHL 98 exhibits revamped AI and a marginal reworking of its already superb graphic engine. There's no doubt whatsoever that this pair sits atop the PC hockey world and it's probably no coincidence that both are developed in and around hockey-mad Vancouver, Canada.

But that's not to say there aren't other alternatives. Lovers of silly sports may find solace in GT Interactive's NHL OPEN ICE, and that's covered here too. Then there's the also-rans, recent titles you should still find in the minor leagues (er. . . discount bins)--Time Warner's WAYNE GRETZKY AND THE NHLPA ALL-STARS and Empire Interactive's SOLID ICE come to mind. In any case, Acclaim's NHL BREAKAWAY 98, due by year-end, will have to work out its rookie jitters amongst the company of two very strong players.

NHL Powerplay '98 $34.99

MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS (2D): 486/66, 2x CD-ROM drive, SoundBlaster-compatible sound card, 2MB VGA video card. (3D): Pentium 133, 32MB RAM, 4x CD-ROM drive, SoundBlaster-compatible sound card, Direct3D accelerator card, gamepad.

DESIGNER: Radical Entertainment

PUBLISHER: Virgin Interactive Entertainment, Irvine, CA.
800-VIECOM1
www.vie.com

Smart Player

Ever since Radical Entertainment took what they learned from its innovative but sloppy BRETT HULL HOCKEY 95 and stuck it into the NHL POWERPLAY mold, hockey playin' gamers have been talking about the possibilities of a merger between this level of smarts and something other than its relatively antiquated and sprite-filled 2D uni-camera graphics.

Now, Radical has granted their wishes with NHL POWERPLAY 98, a title that's got looks and brains. Again with the blessings of both the National Hockey League and the NHL Player's Association, they've fashioned the closest hockey package ever to what is arguably one of the top sports games of all time, EA Sports' NHL HOCKEY. But, though POWERPLAY remains the best "substance" hockey there is, especially in single-player mode where the program's AI is truly tested, little weaknesses keep it from taking the crown.





TV OR COMPUTER GAME? POWERPLAY 98 players usually move and position themselves exactly as they would in the NHL.



KABOOM Stevie Y lets a howitzer rip from the slot, as shown from the POWERPLAY 98 replay camera.

Net Gains

Visually, Radical programmers have introduced motion-captured players and a 3D environment. They've also offered up no less than five roving cameras, and if you gloss over the small stuff or choose a distant perspective the overall appearance is pretty close to state-of-the-art.

But up close you'll see curiously angular players that look even more un-rounded from certain perspectives, become awfully skinny from the side, and turn into static little blockmen when they hit the bench. Ice surfaces and crowds sometimes "ripple" as they approach the forefront, pucks may momentarily disappear in the corners, and skaters appear a bit too large for the ice surface.

If you're anything like me, you'll finally settle on the relatively distant Overhead cam. Here, you won't get quite the same sensation of 3D, but you will see enough of the ice surface to get a good read on what everybody's doing and lose all of the nitpicky irritants addressed above.

The original POWERPLAY featured gameplay options galore, and nothing has been lost in this version. including defensive and offensive positioning, player trades, the ability modify or switch off virtually every major real-life rule, and much more. After each contest, you'll be greeted with a battery of stats and a three-star selection with real player head shots. Season lengths are variable, as are playoff rounds.

POWERPLAY's entire menu system is gamepad-driven, which I found quite inconvenient, with an annoying and constant involuntary scroll that had me "exiting" instead of "starting" and consistently ending up where I didn't want to be. I tried three more controllers and the situation never cleared up.

Real realism

And that brings us to the most important topic of all--how your charges behave in the heat of competition. Those of you brought up on a diet of EA SPORTS hockey will notice right off that POWERPLAY takes a far subtler approach. Speed bursts, for instance, may well instill your selected player with some mighty fast skates, but they won't force him to hit warp speed.

The same thing applies to just about every facet of the game. Collisions can be rough, often brutal enough to lay an unfortunate player out for a spell, but they won't send human missiles rocketing about the ice. Players hook, hold, and grapple in a constant flurry not unlike the NHL, and even shots and passes that seem a bit retarded at first begin to feel within the range of realistic human limitations the more you play.

Aside from an authentic pace, POWERPLAY is a wonderful judge of what should bulge the old twine and what should stay out. A good goal scorer left unchecked in the deep slot always stands a great chance, but wild melees with several defenders backchecking do not. Breakaways, rare though they are in this game (as they should be), often result in a goal, while "1 on 2" opportunities probably won't. That is, of course, unless the single offensive player happens to possess the shot of a John LeClair or the moves of a Saku Koivu.

As in the EA game, teams go through very definite hot and cold streaks, sometimes confined to a few fleeting minutes, sometimes lasting an entire contest. Thankfully, it feels less pre-ordained in this context. In NHL HOCKEY, for instance, a "team on the skids" will still generate a bevy of chances yet somehow fail to bury the biscuit--extremely frustrating. In POWERPLAY, a rough patch might be typified with some missed checks, off-the-mark shots, and the same sort of general malaise that would permeate a real-life cold streak.

When your team is flying, however, POWERPLAY lets you pull off some truly skilled maneuvers beyond the regular advanced fare of faked shots, one-timers, dekes and the like. As the manual explains, deflections, hooking, double-tap dumpins and sliding blocks are all within the reach of a well-versed player with a 4-plus button gamepad.

And that brings me to something else I really like about POWERPLAY: the arrangement of gamepad controls. You'll soon find you won't be able to slap the puck then mow down a couple of defenders all with the same button, simply because the game won't allow you to do it. This little development should effectively slow anyone who doesn't know his controls.

The gray lining on this silver cloud? Just a few things really, but enough to be at least slightly disconcerting. Pull your goalie and the CPU team will do their best to miss your net, perhaps taking a penalty instead. Dump the puck in from your own end and the CPU goalie may freeze it with absolutely nobody in the offensive zone. Get caught on a "2 on 0" and the CPU team will often

RATED ★★★★☆

APPEAL: Hockey aficionados who appreciate the subtleties of the real thing. NHL HOCKEY fans willing to put of with a bit less gravy for a bit more meat.

PROS: Superb artificial intelligence and team management component. Lots of gameplay options and a generally successful conversion from 2 to 3D.

CONS: Some minor AI inconsistencies, 3D quirks, and questionable player to rink scaling.

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completely squander their opportunity, perhaps going by the net entirely.To make matters worse, watching any of the above for a second time means dealing with the frightfully brief replay component, one that does not sport a save capability.

At The Buzzer

Nevertheless, the factors critical to long-term intrigue are present and accounted for. More simulation than game, NHL POWERPLAY is actually what it claims to be, namely "the most realistic hockey game ever created". I found that winning games was a bit too easy, and it is less a complete sensory "experience" than EA's NHL 98, but, then again, EA's been doing the hockey thing twice as long, haven't they?

NHL 98 **$49.99**

MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS: Pentium 90, 16MB RAM, Windows 95, 4X CD-ROM drive using 32-bit Windows 95 CD-ROM driver, Hi Color-capable 1 MB PCI video card with DirectDraw support, DirectX 5 (included on game CD), 30 MB hard disk space.

DESIGNER/PUBLISHER: EA Sports
San Mateo , CA.
800-245-4525
www.easports.com

The beast is back.

EA Sports' swaggering NHL HOCKEY series has indeed returned for its annual rite of passage, and as usual it's a thing of wondrous beauty that no PC hockey player should ignore. Even better for serious hockey fans, EA has finally put the emphasis on upgraded artificial intelligence rather than the absolute latest in graphical wizardry.

It's no secret that AI has long been the Achilles heel of what otherwise has been one of the most amazing and complete PC sports experiences there is. Now, with Virgin Interactive's smart NHL POWERPLAY 98 descending on the marketplace, EA has made some moves in what would appear to be the right direction. Ain't competition grand?

I remember not so fondly the frustrating oddities of NHL HOCKEY in the past (to this day my garbage can harbors a grudge from one particularly savage beating), and am happy to report that several have been corrected. Breakaways, for starters, an all too common occurrence in earlier efforts, are much harder to get and much tougher to capitalize upon. Oitto for "one-timers," a phrase I swear was dreamed up by an EA designer in the first place. At one time practically the only way to score a goal, successful one-timers now take hard work, pinpoint timing and exacting precision. Yahoo.

Another hole EA has covered nicely is CPU team line changes. You can forget about taking advantage of those ill-timed and horribly slow changes that left the ice wide open for seconds at a time in NHL 97, simply because they don't do it that way anymore. Nor will Lindros and LeClair opt to hit the bench as they break in on a 2-on-0, another ridiculous state of affairs from last year's game.

The Fix Is In

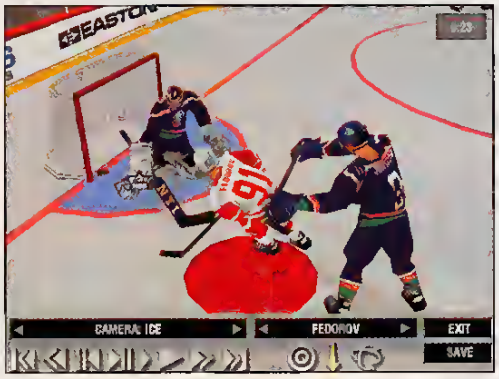
Yet all is not perfect. I've said it before and I'll say it again until I'm done saying it, but the NHL HOCKEY series seems to go out of its way to see a given team wins a given game. Why? I just don't know, but it's obviously and quite purposely instilled in the heart of the program.

Granted, a given team will sometimes out-chance and out-shoot another on a given night and still fall victim to bad luck, bad karma, or whatever--and that's the way it should be. 8ut when you pump more than quadruple the shots at the opposition net--in one case, 83-21--you should not lose 5-1. Ever. And players should not miss open nets from just outside the goal crease or score on weak backhanders from just inside the blueline in order to preserve what the program feels is right. 8ut it happens in NHL 98, far more than real life good or bad luck would permit.

Otherwise, players generally head in the direction they should be heading and position themselves correctly. I said generally. At this stage in the game's development, there's no excuse for power-play pointmen who refuse to pick up easy back-passes at the blueline. There's also no excuse for goalies venturing from their nets to corral cleared pucks before their defensemen get a chance at an icing call. And finally, there's no excuse for entire penalty-killing units hugging in so close to their own net that they won't even venture into a corner to pick up a loose puck.



RECOMMENDED VIEWING You're a bit farther from the action but get a much better read of the ice from one of NHL 98's overhead cameras.



HE SHOOTS, HE SCORES Despite pressure from Islanders D-man Kenny Jonsson, Sergei Federov puts one just inside the right post.

Chrome Job

EA hasn't confined their NHL 98 modifications strictly to gameplay. In keeping with previous installments, the revamped opening sequence is a thing of riveting enormity, and that's just the start. Up in the press box, real life Vancouver Canucks' play-by-play man Jim Hughson has been complemented with a color commentator, and their banter, though sometimes quite generic, certainly helps "sell" the game.

On the ice, NHL 98 is still the smoothest thing on blades, again mimicking a high-tech television broadcast. Player movement is truly spectacular

now, especially when compared to any other PC hockey game. This includes skaters who sport a seemingly infinite variety of maneuvers, not just between whistles but during play stoppages too, when they'll tap their sticks on the ice, test their shooting motions and mill about as real players do. Both audio and video can be a bit over the top at times, but EA can be forgiven for leaving realism behind when the results are this exciting.

Multiple cameras are again part of the package, as is the best replay component to grace any sports game. New for '98 are PIP displays of the penalty box as players get set to exit, disallowed goals attributed to crease violations, and a Coaching Strategies utility. Remember though, NHL 98 is first and foremost a test of reflexes and timing. Good coaching will take you only so far.

In a perfect world, the folks at EA Sports would join forces with the crowd from Radical, take the best from NHL 98 and NHL Powerplay '98, and concoct the perfect game. It really wouldn't take much because the pieces are already there. In the meantime however, and even though I've bestowed identical ratings to both, NHL 98 gets a marginal nod because nothing immerses you in the overall PC hockey show, and nothing is as flat-out invigorating as this veteran performer.

RATED ★★★★☆

APPEAL: Hockey aficionados who appreciate the subtleties of the real thing. NHL HOCKEY fans willing to put of with a bit less gravy for a bit more meat.

PROS: Superb artificial intelligence and team management component. Lots of gameplay options and a generally successful conversion from 2 to 3D.

CONS: Some minor AI inconsistencies, 3D quirks, and questionable player to rink scaling.

NHL Open Ice $22.55

MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS: Windows 95, DirectX enabled 75MHz Pentium, 8MB RAM, 1MB PCI video card, 1X CD-ROM drive.

DESIGNER: Midway Games

PUBLISHER: GT Interactive
New York, New York
800-469-5961
www.gtinteractive.com

Insanity On Ice

See funny man with big head. Ha ha. See other man. He do flip way up in air. This fun. Make me pee pants. It warm. Mmm...

Alright, so GT Interactive's NHL OPEN ICE isn't my cup of tea. But arcade-reared sports-loving kids are probably gonna eat this thing up because 1) it's got their hockey heroes performing outlandish maneuvers and, 2) it's an exacting replica of the coin-op beast. The rest of you? Well, you might find it a hoot too, for a few moments anyway.

But enough of the snide remarks. NHL OPEN ICE, curiously licensed by the same two professional hockey organizations who lent their name to the genre's more serious titles, isn't a simulation and wasn't meant to be. As a matter of fact, it's about as far removed from the National Hockey league as pro wrestling is from the Olympic variety.

From the stereotypically cheesy coin-op front end, players are taken through game setup screens where minimalist game options such as period length, "super" or "normal" goalies and difficulty levels are established. With cheerleaders urging them on, they'll also have a few seconds to enter in a power-up code or two. Then it's game time.

On the ice, its mayhem all the way as your two skaters and goalie battle with computerized or human opposition. And if you've happened across certain codes beforehand or hit the right button combinations while playing, there's no telling what mutations or bizarro activities you might see. Tiny Teemu Selannes with mammoth heads, 12-foot tall Steve Yzermans with puny noggins, and pucks the size of goaltenders are just the start.



PIXEL FEST 2-on 2-in a grainy, chunky environment--the way hockey wasn't meant to be played.



HOCKEY GONE AMOK The sheer force of Joe Nieuwendyk's stick causes the puck to burst into flame, while Claude Lemieux gets 2 minutes for that enormous kisser.

Think the real life Pavel Bure is deceptive? Yeah? Betcha he can't do a triple spin-o-rama 30 feet above ice level or launch a blast of such magnitude that both puck and net end up in flames. The fact that he can here doesn't seem so incredulous once you've been playing awhile, and neither do momentary yet stupefying boosts in speed, checking, shooting and puck-handling. Just make sure your "turbo meter" is cranked--you know, like Scotty Bowman did before he sent Shanahan onto the ice in last year's Cup final.

With four human players, each of you can take on a single on-ice persona and the game will admittedly get a tad exciting. Go ahead, embark on what is a nutso ride through the dark recesses of the minds of programmers gone mad. I double dares ya.

RATED ★★☆☆☆

APPEAL: Uh...sub-adults who feel hockey is but a bump on the road to zany wackiness. Children of the arcade and fans of power-up codes.

PROS: 4-player support, fast-paced action, ridiculous but nifty animations, relaxed system requirements and low pricing.

CONS: 3-man squads, virtually no rules, and ragged, low resolution 2D graphics. Anyone over the mental age of ten will find gameplay heavy on the pandemonium and horribly vapid in comparison to the Virgin or EA Sports titles.

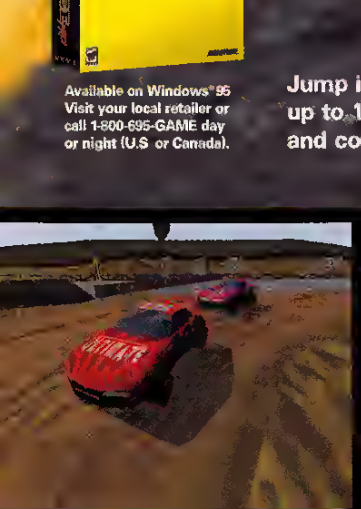
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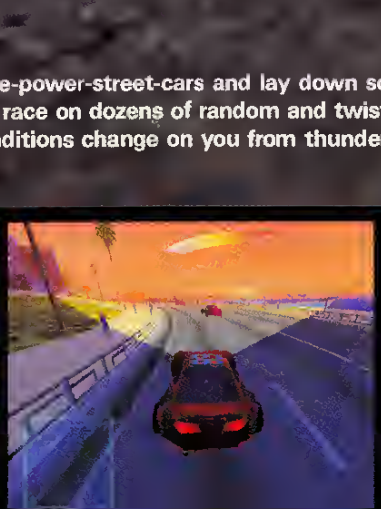


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FOOT



Football coaches know that when the Xs and Os just aren't working, the first casualty is usually the game plan. It's one thing to diagram a sweep on a black board, but quite another when your halfback turns the corner only to find Derrick Thomas or Bryan Cox waiting to separate him from his chin strap. The same principle applies to prognosticating football sims.

Make all the predictions you want, but you can never really separate the games from the hype until the final versions are released. In CGW's first Sports Supplement (Nov 97) we previewed this season's crop of football games, offering best guess-timates on which titles would run to daylight and which would face fourth-and-long. How did we do against the spread?

Let's just say I won't be heading to Las Vegas any time soon. Seriously, though, with one major exception, our previews were fairly close to the mark. Hotly anticipated LEGENDS 98, our choice for second place, was the season's surprise flop, engendering a virulent reaction among gamers of the sort usually reserved for morning breath. Among other new releases, MADDEN 98 was not as good as expected, while MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL 98 rebounded from a mediocre rookie season to capture first place.

ABC Interactive

MONDAY NIGHT FOOTBALL 98

Predicted Finish 3 **Actual Finish** 1

MNF98 achieved not only critical success, but emerged as the clear cut sim of choice among serious football gamers. Driven by a smooth play-calling interface that allows on-the-fly adjustments in formations and assignments, MNF '98 also pumped up the player graphics and A.I. that hampered last year's debut edition. The player sprites were twice as large this time around, much crisper looking, and displayed jersey numbers. The crew at OT Sports obviously sent the game's artificial intelligence back to school in the off-season, as this year's computer opponent is much more challenging than the original. MNF 98 really shines in head-to-head play, with options for Internet, modem, serial, and local two player action. Internet games are limited to coach-only mode, which is MNF 98's strength. Will my 3 wide receiver formation flood your zone? If I blitz will you burn me with a screen pass? Hardcore football choices like these drive every play in MNF 98, making it perhaps the most intense head-to-head sports sim ever.



EA Sports

NCAA FOOTBALL 98

Predicted Finish 4 **Actual Finish** 2

A surprising second place finisher was EA Sports' action-oriented college sim NCAA FOOTBALL. While MADDEN grabbed most of the preseason attention, when release time came along NCAA was the EA product that ultimately turned gamers' heads. Despite pixelated, less than state-of-the-art graphics, the player motion in NCAA is perhaps the most fluid and realistic yet seen in a computer football game. A ball carrier slammed to the turf by a hard tackle, for example, will bounce or slide a few feet further, rather than dropping like a rock as in most sims.

College football fanatics will enjoy NCAA's season play, which simulates the weekly rankings. It's a blast to command your favorite team and guide it in a quest for the national championship. NCAA provides officially licensed rights to 112 Division I-A schools and four major post-season bowl games.



On the down side, there's only one view, an elevated, behind-the-quarterback look that makes throwing to outside receivers an exercise in faith, since they can't be seen unless your QB rolls out to that side. More disappointing is the lack of a planned career mode which would feature recruitment and graduation. Maybe next year.

EA Sports

MADDEN 98

Predicted Finish 1 **Actual Finish** 3

The preview edition EA Sports privately screened at E3 last summer seemed to ensure MADDEN the top spot among this season's football sims. However, like a promising first-round draft pick that never quite makes the grade, something happened to MADDEN 98 along the way.

What happened? It doesn't take Vince Lombardi to figure this one out. Consider that the game's release date was moved up from January to late October. When do games ever ship ahead of schedule? Why would that happen? And how do you get a game out the door three months early? Who made

BALL SIM SUPER BOWL

CGW'S SPORTS COLUMNIST LOOKS BACK AT HIS '97 FOOTBALL PREDICTIONS

by Dennis McCauley

that decision? The answers are, in order: never; Christmas shopping season; cut back on features; and marketing weenies.



So we're left with an undercooked MADDEN that's a good game, but not what it could have been. Still primarily an action-oriented title, MADDEN nevertheless is creeping into sim territory with roster management features that include a rudimentary trading module. Unfortunately, the game's stats, once you locate them, still lag behind the presentation found in the hardcore sims. Gameplay-wise, certain gadget plays, such as the Hail Mary, succeed far too often to maintain any sense of true simulation. And numerous bugs serious hamper the action.

The bottom line on MADDEN 9B is that it's a hot property that was unfortunately pushed out the door before it was fully baked. EA Sports obviously knows this and is completing patches that address some of the key issues (at press time, a 3Dfx patch was nearing release). It's an enjoyable game, but it has a lot of warts.

Sierra

FRONT PAGE SPORTS: FOOTBALL PRO 98

Predicted Finish 7 **Actual Finish** 4

As predicted, Sierra's FRONT PAGE SPORTS: FOOTBALL PRO 98 is essentially last year's game with a few cosmetic changes layered on. That's not necessarily a bad thing, since the '97 version was a prime-time player that copped a 4.5 star review in CGW. In fact, the entire FPS FOOTBALL series has been evolving incrementally over the last four years. This year, unfortunately, there's little substantive reason to recommend the game over its ancestors, especially since Sierra and developer Synergistics are known to be gearing up for a ground-up rebuilding of FRONT PAGE for '99.

So, what's new this time around? Keeping up with the Joneses (and the MADDENs), Sierra has added lackluster play-by-play commentary from



CBS Radio broadcaster Howard David. In the pointless eye candy department you'll find 3D renderings of all 30 NFL stadiums displayed briefly at the beginning of the game. But the in-game views are just generic grey backdrops. The game interface has changed as well, making navigation marginally more intuitive than in past editions. Commissioners of the plentiful FPS online leagues will appreciate the ability to generate HTML output of league files.

If you don't own a previous edition in the series, by all means, grab this one. FPS '98 is a steal at its $29.99 list price (Sierra's tacit admission that the game is just an upgrade), and it still includes all the great features that have made FRONT PAGE the decade's dominant gridiron simulation.

ABC Interactive

HEROES OF THE GRIDIRON

Predicted Finish 5 **Actual Finish** 5

Since HEROES OF THE GRIDIRON is basically MNF '98 with college teams, it may surprise some that it ranks this low. However, while HEROES is a good stand-alone game, one can't help but have the feeling that it should have been just an MNF '98 module. HEROES employs only 32 of the better-known college teams, and uses nostalgic rosters of past players. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of the players seem to be from the 1970's and later, apparently due to licensing difficulties with players who were not NFLPA members. The small number of teams and fairly recent run of players sadly detract from the game's sought-after nostalgic feel. Fortunately, all of MNF's good points apply to Heroes, with the exception of the ABC TV atmosphere, which is super low-key in the college version. Can someone check Keith Jackson for a pulse?



Acclaim

NFL QUARTERBACK CLUB 98

Predicted Finish 6 **Actual Finish** 0

One of last year's sleepers was Acclaim's NFL QUARTERBACK CLUB 97 and arcade sports gamers were hotly anticipating the sequel. Unfortunately the targeted release date in October came and went, and a contact at Acclaim recently informed CGW that the PC edition would not be released this year because it did not measure up to the Nintendo 64 version.

Accolade

LEGENDS FOOTBALL 98

Predicted Finish 2 **Actual Finish** 7

And then there's LEGENDS 9B, probably the only sports game in history to lose to a vaporware title. Yes, LEGENDS is so bad you're better off with no game. And to add insult to injury, LEGENDS had the coolest concept of any sports game this year.

As an NFL junkie, I was completely ga-ga over the chance to pit cross-era pro teams gainst one another. I imagined Emmitt Smith crashing helmets with Dick Butkus, and Sammy Baugh trying to throw the deep post against Deion Sanders. Instead, what Accolade unleashed was a buggy game with meaningless player ratings, bad A.I., and rampant scoring.



Accolade needs to seriously question the design decisions that went into this game. The list is long and undistinguished, but here's just a few of the more vexing issues: How can you release a Win95 product with no mouse support? How is it that it was the season's only game without jersey numbers? How do you release a graphics-oriented sim into today's market with no 3D support? And finally, since it was scheduled for 1997, how can a game be this bad with an extra year of work? The larger question is, can Accolade recover from this disaster and regain the confidence of the average gamer?

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NBA SHOWDOWN

EA Sports' NBA LIVE 98

By Tasos Kaifas

NBA Live 98 **$49.95**

MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS: Windows 95, P100 (P166 recommended), 16MB RAM (32 recommended), 1MB high-color capable PCI SVGA video card, 4x CD-ROM drive. 3D accelerator with 3dfx chipset recommended. For multiplayer: IPX-compatible network or 9600 bps modem.

MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: modem, network, or serial connection (2-8 players on 2 PCs, 1 CD per computer.)

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER: EA Sports
Redwood City, Calif.
(800) 245-4525
www.easports.com

It's amazing that EA Sports' NBA LIVE franchise has been allowed to go four years without competition, especially when you consider how readily game publishers jump on the bandwagon at the first sign of a successful title. Fortunately, NBA LIVE steadily improved from season to season, even without competition. But Sega's new NBA ACTION 98 is a surprise rookie, showing some good moves that even EA's veteran would be wise to learn.

Both games have terrific 3D engines, with texture-mapped players' faces and the like. But NBA LIVE 98, with its years alone in the marketplace, is still good enough to take on any newcomer, even if NBA ACTION 98 gives it a good game.

The Veteran Returns

Like many computer gamers, I always hope for vast improvements in every sequel to my favorite game. As a fanatical sports gamer, that means I have huge expectations each season for all of my favorites. Now, I understand that it's a lot to ask for a developer to improve their product in leaps and bounds each year, especially if the game is already a pretty good one.

NBA LIVE 98 does not leap or even bound over last year's version, but there are a few features that I've been asking for a long time—and received.

First and foremost is the additional control options. Some of the welcome new moves you can make on offense are crossover dribble, a shoulder-lowering drive, and a pivot or spin move. When shooting, you can do a leaner or fade-away by shooting while pushing the directional pad towards or away from the basket, and a hook shot by turning 90 degrees from the basket before you shoot. There's also a direct pass option that let's you pass directly to any player, and a direct shoot button that lets you decide what kind of shot to take from a choice of four, including a high-flying dunk or an easy layup.

The best part of the new controls might be what you can now do on defense. There's a button for stealing and one for hand-checking, so you can control what the player does when he's playing the ballhandler closely

Continued on page 196a



For a little All-Star Game fun, try your hand at the three-point shootout.



Fadeaways and leaners were added this year for more shot versatility.

OOT OUT

Takes On Sega's NBA ACTION 98

NBA Action 98 **$ 50.00**

MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS: Windows 95, P90, 16MB RAM, 2x CD-ROM drive, SVGA graphics with 8-bit color, Sound Blaster 16 or compatible card.

MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: hot seat (2-5 players on one computer)

DEVELOPER: Visual Concepts

PUBLISHER: Sega Entertainment
Redwood City, Calif.
(888) sega-sales
www.sega.com

Rookie of the Year

Even though NBA LIVE is a great game, there's nothing wrong with a little healthy competition. And besides, all Sega's development team really had to do was look at NBA LIVE, an already successful product, and imitate the good and improve the bad. But that's easier said than done.

If you are already familiar with NBA LIVE you will find your way around NBA ACTIDN with little difficulty. Although the front-end interface design is less polished and glitzy than EA's multimedia extravaganza, it is functional and easy to use nevertheless.

What's surprising about NBA ACTIDN is how well the 3D polygonal players are rendered and animated for an inaugural release. They almost look and move as good as they do in NBA LIVE, a title with a few more years to work out the kinks in their men. It's all there: the texture-mapped faces, sharp uniform details, realistic height and girth, and so on. There's still a little work to be done to get their feet planted firmly on the hardwood, however, as players sometimes seem to float through their surroundings—a problem that often plagues 3D games.

There's also the problem of speed consistency. It seems to take too long for a player to set up for a shot, especially dunks, and usually gives the defense enough time to collapse on the player to block his shot. For instance, to prepare for a mean dunk, the player squats down for added spring and then leaps in the air, which, admittedly, is more realistic than just jumping straight up. The problem is it takes him too long to get through the whole routine. The same applies to jump shots if the player is not already square to the basket—he takes a step or two to get set, then shoots.

The speed of the game needs some adjusting too. Even if your machine can maintain a decent frame rate with some of the graphics turned down, the speed of the game itself might be too slow, though you can adjust it slightly. My P133 gives me a decent frame rate with the game set at 640x480 with 8-bit color, but in contrast to it running at 320x240, it's a bit too slow and loses some excitement. The same also seems to affect the game clock, as a twelve-minute

Continued on page 196b



A limited menu pops up from the court to let you change plays in the middle of the action.



Although the graphics are a good rookie attempt, they don't match up well against NBA Live 98.

Continued from page 194

(previously, the defender would automatically swat at the ball when he was close enough, resulting in unwanted fouls). There's even a direct switch option that, like direct pass, let's you switch to a specific player on your team. But the best thing of all is that you can now face up the player you're guarding: When you hold down this button, your player sets up in a proper defensive stance and always faces the player your defending no matter which way you move. He'll side-step laterally and backpedal to cut off the ballhandler, preventing him from driving to the basket.



Set plays to any of eight buttons, then call them from the court.

RATED ★★★★½

APPEAL: Action-oriented PC sports fans looking for the latest and greatest.

PROS: Improved player controls, deeper coaching and strategy options, stunning graphics.

CONS: Still some unbalanced play, 3dfx board required for highest graphics settings.

Balancing Act

The offense in NBA LIVE 98 still has an unmistakable advantage over the defense, as it always has, and the unusually high scores reflect that. The reason for this is two-fold. On the one hand, it's still really difficult to block a shot or even cause an opponent to miss, or to steal the ball. Many computer teams shoot the lights out at the higher difficulty levels, while your team goes cold at the other end. Which leads to the next problem: the disparity among the difficulty settings. The rookie level is too easy offensively, as you can sink just about everything you throw up, most of which are dunks, while any difficulty level higher than that means the same for your opponent, while your seven-foot center sometimes misses easy put-backs. There needs to be a setting where both teams play at even keel.

One way to balance the scales a little is to bump up the frequency of defensive fouls a bit, but you'll also have to play defense more cautiously to avoid the wrath of the whistle-happy referees.

At The Buzzer

Although it perpetuates the series' lingering problem of court awareness by computer-controlled players—who step out of bounds needlessly, shoot from behind the backboard, or get called for three-seconds in the key—NBA LIVE 98 continues to improve on an already solid game. With more coaching and strategy options (you can assign a play to all of the buttons on the gamepad and call them from on the court), it's now a deeper game--but it could still get a few pointers from NBA ACTION 98.

Continued from page 195

quarter goes by unusually slow.

Slower court play is made even duller by the play-by-play announcing by Chick Hearn—he sounds like those announcers of old, calling a game circa 1950 or '60. He gets excited sometimes, but doesn't add the extra exclamations you might expect from a NBA game, especially a computer one.



You can only assign three plays to your gamepad (or keyboard); the other two are unchangeable.

RATED ★★★☆☆

APPEAL: PC basketball fans looking for more control, accuracy than NBA Live.

PROS: Excellent player controls, relatively low system requirements, deep coaching options, good graphics.

CONS: Game speed problems, dull play-by-play, limited multiplayer support.

Play Calling

Off the court, NBA ACTION contains an interesting array of coaching strategies and features. A number of slide bars are used to adjust tempo and crash boards on offense. You can assign plays to three buttons, with two more--alley oop and double team--that can't be changed. On defense, you can also pick one opposing player to double team. All of these settings can be combined into one of three sets that can be called from the court, giving you a lot of combinations to try.

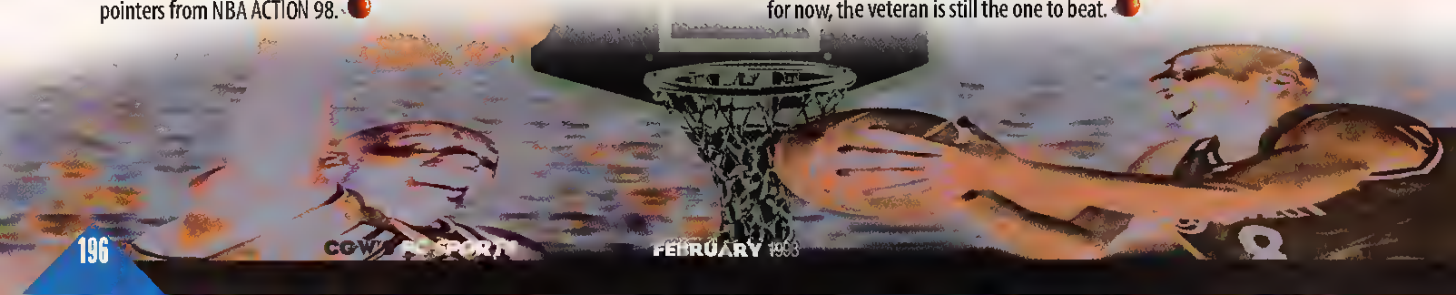
Like NBA LIVE, there is a faceup button on defense (called a step modifier), which doesn't work as well since the defender doesn't stay facing his man. That means you have to let up on the step modifier a lot to correct the direction he's facing. There's also no illegal defense call whatsoever.

But playing defense in NBA ACTION is better in many ways than in NBA LIVE. You really have to work to get an open shot or you'll get rejected. Although it might be a bit too easy to block a shot in NBA ACTION, at least you can do it with dependable regularity. And you'll have to be extra careful about getting your own shots blocked—the shooting animation doesn't end when the ball is released. It will take your man a second or two to recover from taking a shot before he can go after his own loose ball after the block.

Finally, NBA ACTION has the distinct advantage of being far easier on system requirements than NBA LIVE, making it a better choice for those who haven't upgraded their rig to the latest and greatest Pentium with 3D acceleration—a must for getting the full enjoyment out of EA's title.

Final Score

NBA ACTION 98 is a solid and promising contender that should enjoy a good rookie season, but it's going to have to do a little tweaking and adjusting to its game to play at the same level as NBA LIVE. Watch for this player next year, but for now, the veteran is still the one to beat.



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CGW SCORECARD: 6 MONTHS OF SPORTS REVIEWS

GAME	PUBLISHER	REVIEW	RATING	SUMMARY
Baseball				
Baseball Mogul	Infinite Monkey Systems	Nov 97	★★★★½	Very good, unique, clever baseball GM sim.
Diamond Mind	Diamond Mind	Dec. 97	★★★½☆	Statistically accurate text-based baseball sim. Good for stat-heads but graphically dated.
FPS: Baseball 98	Sierra	Oct. 97	★★½☆☆	Better than last year's catastrophe, but this still has a long way to go.
Grand Slam	Virgin Interactive	Oct. 97	★★☆☆☆	Looks and feels like a bad console game. Awkward interface, weak stats and trade AI.
Triple Play 98	EA Sports	Sept. 97	★★★☆☆	Entertaining 3D arcade action, but light on statistical accuracy.
Tony La Russa 4	Maxis Sports	Oct 97	★★☆☆☆	Disastrous step backward for one of the great PC baseball sims. Stick with Tony 3.
Football				
ABC's Monday Night Football '98	OT Sports	Dec 97	★★★★½	Second season of this newbie football sim turns out to be a winner, with better AI, graphics.
Legends Football '98	Accolade	Dec 97	★★½☆☆	By far the year's biggest disappointment. A failed attempt at cross-era football action.
Basketball				
NCAA Basketball Final Four 97	Mindscape	July 97	★★☆☆☆	Mediocre college hoops with dated graphics, limited options, and confused layout.
Golf				
FPS: Golf	Sierra	Sept 97	★★★★☆	Superb graphics and interface; good multiplayer options. TrueSwing is good alternative to swing meter.
British Open Championship Golf	Looking Glass	Aug 97	★★★½☆	Realistic and intelligent golf action, but difficult mechanics and no multiplayer.
Links LS 1998	Access Software	Nov 97	★★★★★	World's best golf sim gets better, with quicker screen redraws and Internet play.
PGA Tour Pro	EA Sports	Oct 97	★★★½☆	Good update of a good series, with multiple courses and great multiplayer options.
Racing				
X-Car: Experimental Racing	Bethesda Softworks	Dec 97	★★★★☆	Deep, intense driving sim that's marred only by being too difficult at times.
Soccer				
Kickoff 97	Maxis Sports	Oct 97	★★★★☆	First U.S. version of ANCO's soccer sim is the best of the class, with great gameplay and challenging AI.
Misc.				
Tennis Elbow	GOTO Software	Nov 97	★★★☆☆	Decent tennis simulation, not groundbreaking, but good enough for die-hards.

Cover photo (page 179) by Andy Hayt courtesy of Sega Entertainment. Special thanks to Eddie Lee (art direction/design) and Ruth Liebman (design/production) of Sq
Two Design, San Francisco, CA for their hard work on this feature

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TONKA, DEEP BLUE AMONG THOSE VYING FOR FIRST SEASON CROWN

econd PGL Season Signups Now Toking Ploce on WWW.PGL.NET web site

At 18, ToNkA (aka ridget Fitzgerald), has a t on her mind—and her ands. Qualifying for the augural season of the GL hasn't been easy for ne of the leading ladies f Quake®. Connecting nd playing from the dor- itory at the prestigious illiard School, where ne majors in viola, was n accomplishment in self.

"If I'm lucky enough win any money playing the PGL, I'd probably se it toward a new viola, though an ISDN or T1 ne would be my second noice," she laughs.

ToNkA is just one of ne many competing for ie Quake crown in the rst season of the AMD rofessional Gamers' eague. As of November oth, Azrael13 led the ualifying rounds, utscoring the kill-crazy ick through an uncanny bility to survive, and a owerful Kill-Per-Minute tio of 2.03.

Fast-twitch gaming n't for everyone; some ke to think as well as noot. David Magro, aka DeepBlue, is one such gamer. Known as one of the premier strategists of Westwood Studio's Command & Conquer®: Red Alert™, DeepBlue is competing to qualify for the Command & Conquer®: Red Alert™ finals in the PGL's first season.

"Most on-line games have you blasting away at your opponent. Command & Conquer®: Red Alert™ requires a lot more thought than that," noted Magro.

Offering more than $250,000 in cash and prizes to winners in its first year, the AMD PGL has attracted thousands of the world's best gamers, and hordes of spectators online and on TV (see story below.)

Signups for the second season of the PGL, which begins in February, are taking place now on the PGL web site, located at **www.pgl.net.**

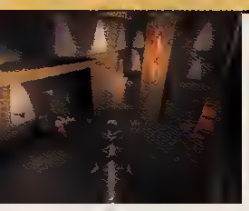
PGL STANDINGS AS OF NOVEMBER 20, 1997

QUAKE

Rank/Name	Score	Kills	Deaths	Sui.	Avg%	KPM	Play Time
1. Azrael13	1948	2408	264	26	90%	2.03	19:45
2. frick	1922	3735	858	112	81%	1.90	32:44
3. graphik	1910	1680	206	28	89%	1.89	14:50
4. cabalist	1884	2155	521	70	80%	1.31	27:20
5. Rept-POST	1874	934	171	20	84%	1.78	08:45
6. B2	1853	656	157	11	80%	1.74	06:17
7. dmann	1820	1495	546	70	73%	2.00	12:29
8. JenBUNNY	1818	1377	462	29	74%	1.70	13:29
9. Rykov_	1808	1562	692	68	69%	1.37	19:00
10. Razacla	1808	1360	481	50	73%	1.66	13:39

COMMAND & CONQUER®: RED ALERT™

Rank/Name	Score	Allied (W/L)	Soviet (W/L)	Total (W/L)	Avg.
1. BJ2	1951	14/1	33/3	47/4	92%
2. SOLJA	1880	57/19	42/14	99/33	75%
3. Havoc3	1856	55/19	32/16	87/35	71%
4. N-sane	1846	10/3	55/15	65/18	78%
5. Hoggleford	1842	0/0	96/40	96/40	70%
6. unabomber1	1841	3/3	47/13	50/16	75%
7. xGODx	1839	3/5	61/25	64/30	68%
8. push	1828	29/6	69/18	98/24	80%
9. shooter1	1825	51/5	6/0	57/5	91%
10.MOBBIN	1806	0/0	21/3	21/3	87%



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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: EASY / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

Aces Low

This Sabre Needs Sharpening



BRIDGE OUT The need to arm specific weapons and adjust sights for ground-attack runs may seem like busywork to some, but it captures some of the atmosphere of the cockpit-as-workplace.

by Robin G. Kim

In air combat—real *or* simulated—there's no kill like a gun kill. Why is it, then, that the Korean War era, which showcased some of the hottest missile-deprived gunfighters ever to see combat, has been almost totally neglected by sim developers? Whatever the reason, newcomer Eagle Interactive has—at last—filled this mysterious void with SABRE ACE: CONFLICT OVER KOREA.



Price: $44.99
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 133, 16MB RAM, 2MB video card, DirectX-compatible sound card, 4x CD-ROM
Multiplayer Support: Modem, null modem, TCP/IP network (8 players, 1 CD per player)
Designer: Eagle Interactive
Publisher: Virgin Interactive Irvine, CA (888) VIE-COM1 (714) 833-1999 www.vie.com

At first glance, SABRE ACE seems to have all the makings of a real winner. It has a novel setting, you can fly several plane types on either side, the aircraft renderings are gorgeous, and it supports just about every 3D accelerator card known to man. Alas, the game's promise does not hold up quite so well under closer examination. While its strong points demonstrate how much gaming potential exists in this era, spotty execution in key areas denies SABRE ACE any chance of becoming a flight-sim classic.

FROM PROPS TO JETS

Play options include instant action, customizable dogfights with up to four planes per side, multiplayer dogfights, training missions, and a career mode. A career plays out as a series of independent canned missions. There are 25 if you choose to fight for the USAF in support of South Korea, or 20 if you fly as a USSR pilot unofficially aiding the North Koreans. Americans start out with an F-51 Mustang, with an eventual transition to the F-80 Shooting Star, then finish out the war in the hotrod F-86 Sabre. Soviet pilots begin similarly with a Yak-9 prop-driven fighter, then graduate to the Sabre's legendary opponent, the MiG-15. The prospect of upcoming aircraft upgrades provides plenty of motivation to progress through the missions, and the added variety of planes helps keep gameplay fresh.

Missions aren't dynamically generated, but they are interesting and diverse, with a good mix of realistic air-to-air and air-to-ground assignments. Each sortie is preceded by a briefing, which is accessed through a clunky, but atmospheric, interface. Even details such as ADF (automatic direction finder) beacons, divert airfields, and safe bailout zones are covered, but the flight plan is carved in stone—no changes are allowed.

Most of the game's flights include some amount of peripheral air activity, but they still suffer from a somewhat sterile feel. This may be historically accurate, however, and occasional surprises, such as wingmen who turn back because of engine trouble or distress calls from besieged allies serve to liven things up. Both time compression and an option to jump to the next stage of the mission are provided for those who prefer to skip over the boring parts. Curiously, there is no corresponding way to avoid having to land at the end of a flight (unless you bail out) and still progress to the next mission in the sequence.

Up to seven wingmen can accompany you on every flight. Since you don't lead most missions, this gives plenty of opportunities to practice formation flying (or to use the special formation autopilot). Appropriately timed digitized radio chatter lends the sim some welcome atmosphere; the terse, rapid-fire acknowledgments of wingmen checking in are particularly well done. The few wingman commands you have available when you are leading a section are not very effective, but it is still wise to stick close to your brethren so they can distract bandits you want to attack or elude.

STRANGE BREW

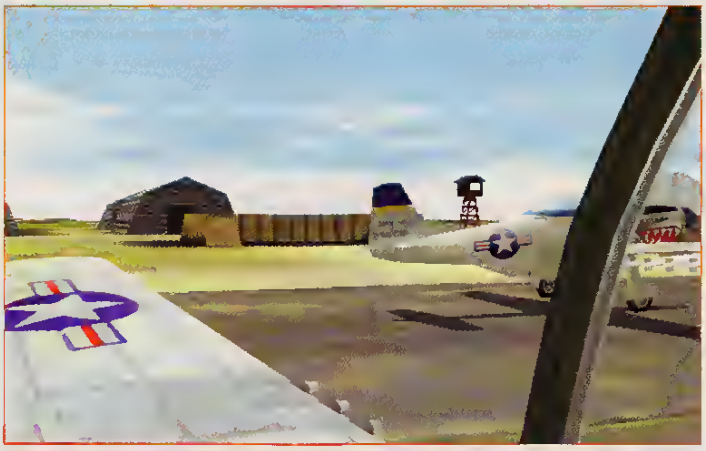
SABRE ACE's flight modeling is a bizarre mix of realistic and arcadelike elements. One almost gets a sense that



SPLASH ONE MIG You will dominate the skies once you graduate to the F-86 Sabre (on the USAF side).

the design resulted from a pitched battle between realism nuts and action-game fans. The planes have a pleasantly fluid feel, with suitably mushy low-speed handling, and do bleed airspeed in turns, but the program artificially limits control inputs to prevent stalls. All aircraft are overpowered in climbs and can maintain ridiculously steep pitch angles indefinitely. Prop fighters demonstrate no torque effects, though lift is appropriately enhanced at higher throttle settings. Turn performance is fairly accurate for them, but becomes unrealistically good once you get to fly the F-86 or MiG-15. This problem is exacerbated by the absence of blackout/redout modeling.

Casual gamers will not mind these deviations from reality, of course, and even serious simmers might find the furballs satisfactory if they refrain from exploiting loopholes in the flight model. What casual gamers may have a problem with is the sim's difficulty, which cannot be adjusted. The AI pilots vary widely in skill. While the dumber ones are easy marks, the aces can give even experienced sim vets headaches. Kills are especially hard to come by in the later prop-fighter missions, when most of your opponents are flying vastly superior jets. Fortunately, evasion and escape is usually an option. Also, you need not succeed at a mission to proceed to the next.



FORMATION TAKEOFF There's more emphasis on formation flying in this game than in your typical sim.

NO JOY

Part of what makes dogfights in SABRE ACE so tough is the sim's awful cockpit view system. Only 10 fixed-view directions are provided, plus a GCI tracking mode that automatically snaps between the 10 in an attempt to keep a selected target in sight. "Attempt" is the operative word here—there are large gaps between views that should rightfully overlap. An enormous blind spot also exists upward to the sides and rear. Combining the GCI view with peeks at the target information displayed on the dash is workable once you have learned some of the AI's behavior patterns, until then, prepare to be frustrated. Blind spots also make finding targets annoyingly difficult.

Except for some stunning aircraft renderings, the visuals are pretty, not jaw-dropping. Ground detail is coarse except near cities, yielding a poor sense of your height above ground. However, visibility limits are high, and SABRE ACE boasts impressively fast frame rates with full terrain texturing—if you have a 3D video accelerator card, that is. Non-accelerated graphics are too choppy to be playable on an average Pentium unless you turn the detail all the way down. Even the accelerated graphics can bog down when the view fills with too many aircraft or flak bursts. Be warned that a few buyers have encountered installation problems on systems equipped with 3D cards.

SABRE ACE shows much promise, but is ultimately flawed. Even if you can accept the flight-model simplifications, the game's otherwise immersive gameplay is still marred by its deficient, playability-sapping cockpit view system. This may be the best Korean War sim released in many years, but right now, that's not saying much.

Back to School

Although SABRE ACE's combat training missions are nothing special, the extensive takeoff, landing, and routine navigation tutorials are exceptionally well done. You get to fly real trainer aircraft: the T-6 and Yak-18, respectively, for USAF and USSR primary training. The T-33 or MiG-15UTI follow only after you have mastered the prop trainer and are deemed ready to strap on a jet.

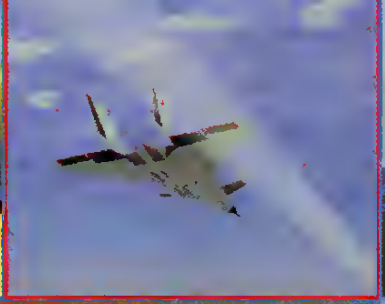
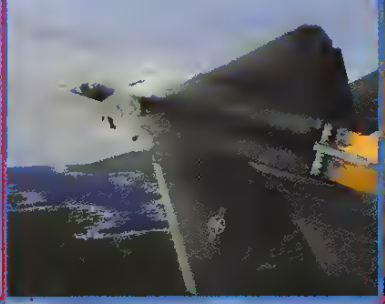
The virtual flight instructor who talks you through the lessons watches you like a hawk, monitoring and critiquing everything: your speed, altitude, heading, even the direction you are looking (he gets really annoyed when you turn around to look at him in the back seat). If the instructor thinks the plane is about to crash, he will scold you as he takes back the controls. Fighting for control of the plane at that point will only get you more verbal grief. This interactivity makes the training immersive and fun—even humorous at times—as well as effective. Though you don't have to work through it, training is a high point of the game.

APPEAL: Anyone who has been anxiously waiting for someone to release a Korean War sim; experienced sim fans willing to overlook flight-model inaccuracies; novices seeking an accessible, yet challenging, first sim.

PROS: Outstanding flight-training segment; high 3D-accelerated frame rates; beautiful aircraft graphics; good atmosphere; Korean War setting.

CONS: Limited number of canned missions and no mission builder; terrible view system; simplified flight model; poor performance without a 3D card; no multiplayer chat; may be too difficult for novices.

CG RATED





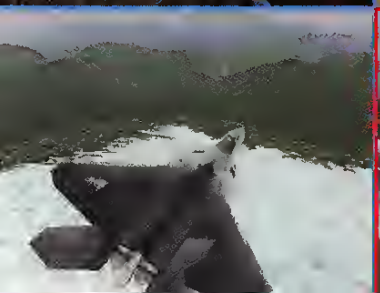















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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: EASY / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

Two Too Many

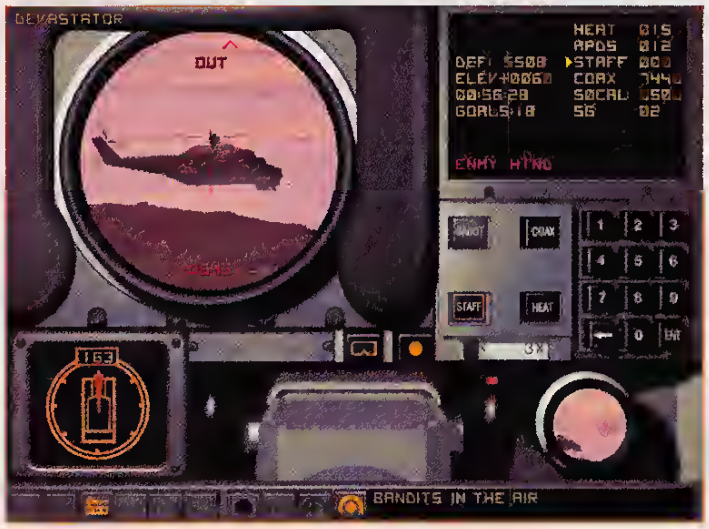
NovaLogic Takes Another Shot...and Tanks

by Patrick C. Miller

Do we really need a sequel to NovaLogic's ARMORED FIST? Three years ago, many gamers were turned off by its blotchy graphics and lack of realism. While ARMORED FIST 2 sports better graphics, sound, and multiplayer capabilities than its predecessor, it's still an action game dressed up as a sim.

ARMORED FIST 2 puts players in the role of a U.S. Marine Corps tank commander participating in United Nations peacekeeping efforts in various hotspots around the world. You begin your career at the Marine training center at 29 Palms, California, where tutorial missions provide basic combat training. There are four campaigns of increasing complexity, with eight scenarios per campaign. Missions take place in Africa, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East. The missions can be played in any order. Results don't carry over from one mission to the next, but statistics are kept on your tank commander's career.

Although ARMORED FIST 2 is a DOS game, it installs easily and can be played under Windows 95. The manual adequately covers the game's mechanics, but provides no information on vehicles or weapons in the game—other than the M1A2, and even that is minimal. A keyboard command overlay and quick-reference card are provided.



AA ABRAMS In ARMORED FIST 2, the M1A2 tank is one nasty antiaircraft platform, capable of easily shooting down helicopters and attack aircraft with armor-piercing ammo from its main gun.



Price: $44.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 120, Windows 95 or DOS, 16MB RAM, SVGA graphics, 4x CD-ROM; supports most major joysticks and all Sound Blaster-compatible sound cards
Multiplayer Support: Modem or serial connection (2 players), LAN or Internet (2–8 players)
Designer: Sherwood "Kent" Simon
Publisher: NovaLogic
Calabasas, CA
(818) 878-0325
www.novalogic.com

ALL BUTTONED UP

You control each tank through a combination of joystick and keyboard commands, and you can choose from four stations: tank commander buttoned (known in the M1A2 as the commander's independent thermal viewer, or CITV), tank commander unbuttoned, gunner, and driver. There are also four external views and a map screen portraying the M1A2's intervehicular information system (IVIS). From this screen, you can maneuver units under your command by assigning waypoints. You can also issue orders to units within your platoon, instructing them to change formation, spacing, and, to a limited extent, targeting priorities.

Weapons available in the M1A2 are the 120mm gun, the 7.62mm coaxial machine gun, and the .50-caliber machine gun on the turret's top. The main gun fires Sabot (armor-piercing), HEAT (high-explosive, antitank) and STAFF (smart target-activated fire-and-forget) rounds. Depending on the mission, you can call on A-10 ground-attack aircraft, AH-64 Apache helicopters, and rocket artillery for additional support. M2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles tag along on some missions. Opponents include T-72 and T-80 tanks, BMP infantry fighting vehicles, BRDM armored cars, Tanguska antiaircraft vehicles, Mi-24 Hind gunships and Su-25 Frogfoot ground-attack aircraft.



DRIVE YOURSELF CRAZY The only way you can back up your tank is to drive it yourself.

STEEL OFF TARGET

When it comes to realism in first-person simulations, I'm no fanatic. I can overlook quite a bit as long as the game at least *feels* somewhat real. But with ARMORED FIST 2, my credulity is stretched beyond its limits. From the commander's station, I can order my tank to speed up, slow down, and stop, but I can't order it to back up. I can shoot down helicopters and jets with armor-piercing rounds from the 120mm gun.

Attack helicopters—both friendly and enemy—fly directly into enemy positions and are usually quickly shot down. Artillery is called in from the gunner's



COMMANOING VIEW Hammenng away at aircraft and lightly armored vehicles is satisfying with the 50-caliber machine gun Too bad it becomes nearly worthless when full realism is used

station simply by pointing the gun at the target area And where the heck is the infantry? Basic tactics such as fighting from hull-down positions aren't even part of ARMORED FIST 2 Standoff-attacks with long-range antitank guided missiles are nonexistent

One of the most annoying aspects of the original ARMORED FIST was the autolock targeting system that often made it difficult for you to shoot at the greatest threat, because target selection control was taken out of your hands Autolock targeting remains in ARMORED FIST 2 , but it's better implemented. And this time, NovaLogic didn't make the mistake of leaving out a more realistic gunnery model for those who want to do their own shooting

SIGHT SEEING

By choosing the realistic play option and leaving autolock targeting turned off, you can acquire targets on your own through the gunner's primary sight Successfully painting the target with the laser rangefinder will automatically make gun barrel adjustments for the ammo type that you load After that, just squeeze the trigger and fire If the round misses, make adjustments until a hit is scored. Unfortunately, poor design decisions add needless complexity to manual gunnery, ruining this aspect of the game.

Although I eventually became proficient at manual gunnery, I found that as I played more complex scenarios in which my tank had to rapidly engage multiple targets, I needed to turn the autolock feature back on Manual targeting was too slow and too unwieldy. Playing from the driver's position with the autolock option enabled is the best way to win the more difficult missions But most armor-sim fans would prefer to spend their time shooting the 120mm gun than driving

TURKEY IN YOUR TANK

The game severely lacks in the AI department Some units are totally passive as you pick them off one by one, while others act as if they're intent on ramming your tank Mission complexity and difficulty is achieved by adding more and more enemy units to destroy while forcing you to control more and more brainless friendly units. I also experienced problems with game crashes and an apparent bug that causes units to become confused by their waypoint orders.

Anyone hoping that ARMORED FIST 2 might be a worthy successor to M1 TANK PLATOON, the MicroProse classic released back in 1989, will be disappointed. The good news for armor fans is that tank simulations, which have been neglected by game publishers for years, are suddenly in style At least there's hope that a new tank-sim champion will emerge in the near future

APPEAL: Gamers who are looking for an unrealistic, but easy-to-play tank simulation.

PROS: Rolling terrain; great sound effects; multiplayer capability.

CONS: Clueless AI; utter lack of realism; crash problems; limited replay value.

CG RATED

A View of Two Abrams:
Armored Fist 2 vs. iM1A2 Abrams

NovaLogic's ARMORED FIST 2 joins Interactive Magic's iM1A2 ABRAMS as the second tank sim on the market featuring the US Army's M1A2 battle tank How do the two games stack up against each other?

For pure glitz through the use of graphics, music, sound effects, and full-motion video, ARMORED FIST 2 is the hands-down winner But for those who want a more realistic experience without the requirement of a speedy, RAM-crammed MMX Pentium, iM1A2 is the clear choice.



iM1A2 ABRAMS: Graphically flat, but realistic.

The gunnery model of iM1A2 is far more accurate than that in ARMORED FIST 2 Real-world tactics actually work. And although iM1A2's AI isn't the greatest, it makes the AI in ARMORED FIST 2 look pathetic iM1A2 includes dynamic campaigns, infantry, and greater unit variety, and it handles air and artillery support far better.



ARMORED FIST 2: Glitzy, but empty.

ARMORED FIST 2's strength lies in its ease of play and terrain modeling. Surprisingly, I liked ARMORED FIST 2's commander's station better than iM1A2's, because it was easier to spot and designate targets for my gunner. ARMORED FIST 2 is for gamers who want to jump into an Abrams and drive around the battlefield admiring the pyrotechnics they create


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The Plot Thickens

DIFFICULTY LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE ADVANCED

What This Sim Lacks in Flash and Dazzle It Makes Up For in Storyline

by Thierry Nguyen

Developments in the space sim genre have seemed more focused on looks and movies than on innovation. The DARKLIGHT CONFLICT had a very pretty engine that was attached to a very mediocre game. X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER was heavy on the eye-candy, but light on the game-quality. And WING COMMANDER IV was more movie than game. FORCED ALLIANCE has the opposite problem: It has quite good gameplay, but dated graphics. However, if you've been aching for a space experience that's not devoid of storyline, you might want to overlook FORCED ALLIANCE's plain appearance.



RETRO ROCKETS Despite 3D acceleration, the space-combat graphics in FORCED ALLIANCE have a decidedly early-'90s feel.

SPACE TRUST

FORCED ALLIANCE starts out as a simple, straightforward "Us versus Them" type of space war, but things get a bit more complicated as the game progresses. In the beginning, there are only three sides: Humans, the enemy Voraptoid, and the neutral Marauders. But as the game goes on, more races are thrown into the mix and the plot shifts so that you don't know who your friends really are—some enemies could turn out to be your staunchest allies.

Your decisions and actions help determine how the story flows. Many times, you will be given dialog choices that will determine your options, and other times your actions in combat will determine what happens next. Even when you start the game at the lowly rank of pilot, there are missions that affect your interalien relationships. One overarching plot will always play out, but your actions can alter the alliances between the Humans and the various races. In one string of missions, I flew as a pilot for the human forces, when I replayed those particular missions, I allowed myself to be captured by the enemy and flew as a P.O.W. The basic mission goals stayed the same, but the missions were different simply because of perspective.

Later, when you are promoted to commander or captain, you have a more direct impact on the game's flow. As a commander, you will be consulted on important decisions, such as with whom to ally and which missions to accept, as a captain you will make the actual decisions. There is one "best" ending, but to reach it will require that you know how to properly handle each race.

Because you can ally with the different factions, there are certain points in the game in which you fly their ships. Each race's ships handle differently, and each features one unique ability. Some of the races have two ship types, but the difference within those two ships is negligible.

Combat is quite good, as the enemy AI will properly use the each ship's advantages. One aspect of combat you might find frustrating is that only one race can counterattack against missiles, while everyone else has to dodge them by sight. Orbital is supposedly developing a patch that will let all ships counteract missiles.

GRAPHICS SCHMAPHICS

The main drawback of this game is its lackluster graphics. Even when using 3Dfx-acceleration, the graphics engine reminds me more of STAR RANGERS and STAR CRUSADER than of anything that came out within the past year. Hardware makes slight adjustments to the textures on the ships, gets rid of pixelation, and boosts the frame-rate.

For those of you who were disappointed with the lack of single-player in X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER, wanted more influence in the story than WING COMMANDER IV, and can bear with the dated graphics and lack of multiplayer games, FORCED ALLIANCE is a good buy. I hope that FORCED ALLIANCE is a sign that meaty single-player campaigns and stories are returning to space sims.



APPEAL: Space-simmers who value interesting single-player campaigns and control of their character's destiny over flashy graphics.

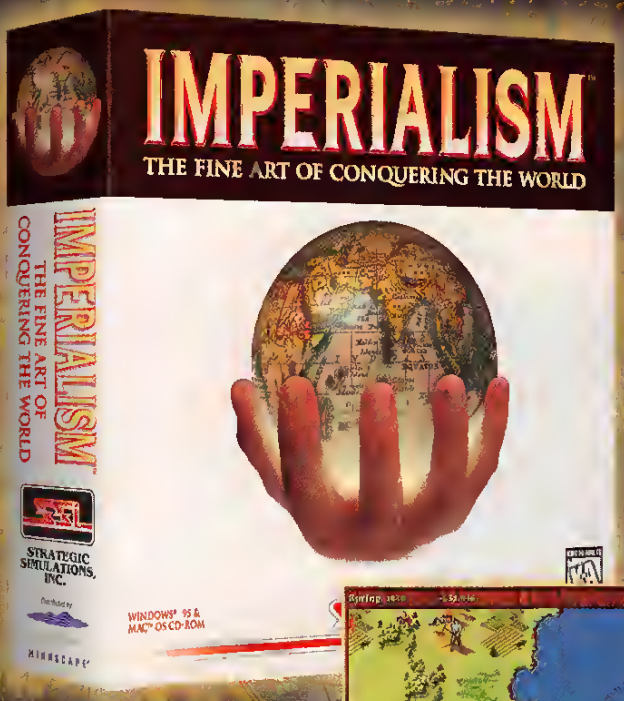
PROS: Excellent single-player campaign; variety of ships with unique handling; complex branching storyline.

CONS: Dated graphics, even with hardware acceleration; ship variety cries out for multiplayer support.

CG RATED

Price: $29.95
Minimum System Requirements: 486DX-100 or better, 16MB RAM, Windows 95, 40MB hard-drive space, 2x CD-ROM, VGA graphics card, Windows 95-compatible sound cards
Multiplayer Support: None
Designer: Orbital Studios
Publisher: Ripcord Games
Santa Clara, CA
(888) 797-5867
www.ripcordgames.com

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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: ADVANCED

CG CHOICE

Bloody Good Time

This Is Not Your Kid's Real-time Strategy Game

by Greg Fortune

Bungie's latest game, MYTH: THE FALLEN LORDS, is not for the weak of spirit. . .or stomach. It is, however, a victory for all of us who love the combat aspects of games like AGE OF EMPIRES and WARCRAFT, but could do without the endless gathering and building. Featuring a physics-based 3D engine and spectacular graphic violence, MYTH strips the standard real-time strategy game to the bone. What it leaves behind is brutal and bloody combat that is engaging, addictive, and brimming with more attitude than a surly dwarf.



SNOW BLIND Weather effects, including snow, can affect your troops' performances.

TELL ME A STORY

The premise of MYTH is pretty standard. An army of the undead is ravaging your homeland, and you must drive them out or be destroyed. Ordinarily, a premise this tired would choke the originality out of a product, but MYTH's story stands out because it is detailed, original, and well-integrated into the game. The prologue, cut-scenes, and unfolding plot combine to involve you in the conflict at a deeper level than a shallow back-story ever could. You get an actual sense of unease as you face the dark times ahead.

In creating the characters for MYTH, Bungie wisely decided to mix a few familiar fantasy staples with some new creations of its own. You will immediately recognize the dwarves, foot soldiers, and archers. The unfamiliar elements come in the form of the walking dead: grunt-like thralls, spirit spearmen known (appropriately) as soulless, exploding gas-filled corpses called wights, and others.

Each unit, friend or foe, has a unique name and a unique history. As the men under your command gain experience, they become more effective and more valuable. An archer with 10 kills will fire faster and more accurately than an archer who has never seen action. As you progress through the missions, veterans that have survived previous battles will occupy the positions that would otherwise be filled by raw recruits.

TALK ABOUT A CONTROL FETISH!

You observe and control your units from an overhead perspective. Not only can you move your point of view forward, back, left, and right, but you can rotate your perspective based on two separate



Price: $49.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 133, Windows 95 or NT 4.0, 16MB RAM (32MB recommended), 31MB hard-drive space, 4x CD-ROM drive, 16-bit SVGA video card, Microsoft-compatible mouse, 28.8Kbps connection for Internet play.
Macintosh: Power Mac 100Mhz, System 7.5, 16-bit monitor, 640x480 resolution graphics.
Multiplayer Support: TCP/IP LAN, Internet (2–16 players)
Designer: Jason Jones
Publisher: Bungie
(800) 295-0060
www.bungie.com

Your Head, Sir...

Myth's multiplayer aspect is very robust, with 11 different types of network games, including Bodycount (the player with the most kills wins), Steal the Bacon (a capture-the-flag type game), and Last Man on the Hill (a straight-ahead deathmatch). Several multiplayer maps have been included, and you can also use any maps you've reached in the single-player game. A map editor is notably missing.

Team play is allowed, as is planning time, complete with a white board feature. Another very cool feature is the ability to trade one unit type for another. Trading is done on a point system, and if the person creating the game allows it, is a great way to avoid predictability in online games. Sadly, the only methods for playing Myth with friends are via Bungie.net, TEN, and over a network using IP or Appletalk. If you don't have an ISP or a network, you're out of luck.



DECISION TIME These are all the options available to you in choosing a multiplayer game. Too bad there isn't an option for modem games.



GET IN LINE! MYTH is a difficult game that demands excellent strategy and unit control. Placing troops in 1 of 10 formations is a key to victory.

focal points. One rotation pivots around the center of your field of view, allowing you to circle whatever you are looking at. The other allows you to rotate in place, which gives you a view of the surrounding area. At first, moving around and directing troops using this view system is a bit difficult. With practice, however, you will quickly learn to appreciate the view system's flexibility. My only complaint about the controls is that you should be able to adjust the view's angle of elevation, as fighting on high ground frequently left me unable to see enough of the battlefield to fight effectively. Otherwise, I found that the controls worked well and were well thought-out.

DANCE OF THE DEAD

Most games offer you a few easy beginning scenarios before getting to the meat of the game. MYTH does not. Make no mistake, this game is difficult.

The most surprising thing about the gameplay is the degree of strategy required to win any given scenario. You begin each mission with a set number of units, and unless you find additional troops wandering around the level (or fighting for their lives), that's all you have to work with. MYTH allows you to arrange your units in a variety of formations. Surprisingly, these formations actually work. From vanguards to staggered lines, how you arrange your forces affects your strategy and your chances for survival. If you want to have any veterans left for the next scenario, you will need to figure out an effective way of deploying your troops based on their number and composition. You also need to factor in the environment and the makeup of your opposition. Leave a flank exposed and you'll soon find a couple of ape-like ghôls hacking apart your archers with their scythes. Fail to take the high ground and you'll be showered with spears as the soulless come over the rise. Let the wights get too close and these walking bombs will shred your ranks with wave after wave of earth-shaking explosions. In short, you need to think ahead to win.



MAKING A MESS A couple of dwarves can really ruin an enemy's day. If friendly troops are in the way, they'll ruin yours, too.

YOU LOOK GOOD IN RED

The action happens in a beautifully rendered world. Arrows and bombs arc gracefully toward their targets, blood stains the ground where it falls, and freshly removed heads roll slowly downhill. The dwarves' explosives blacken the earth and the remains of corpses lie in heaps on the ground. Seasons, and weather, change, bringing rain and snow that affects the performance of your troops. Wind blows arrows off course, and rain dampens the fuses of dwarven bombs.

The 3Dfx rendering is marvelous, but there is a catch—the game shipped with a bug in the Voodoo Rush routines that sometimes crashes the game while loading levels. It's disappointing that Bungie would put so much effort into this game and then ship it with game-crashing bugs. There is a patch available online, but that doesn't excuse the fact that the retail version isn't a fully working product.

But MYTH kicks some serious butt. Not since DIABLO has a game so captured my attention and waking hours. With its blend of in-your-face combat, realistic terrain and weather, and entertaining characters, MYTH is a winner.

APPEAL: Anyone who loves graphic tactical combat but could do without the building and harvesting that usually goes with it.

PROS: Outstanding engine, gameplay, story, and environment; addictive gameplay.

CONS: View system needs elevation controls; game has crash bug; no modem-to-modem or direct-cable support; no map editor.

CG RATED ★★★★½



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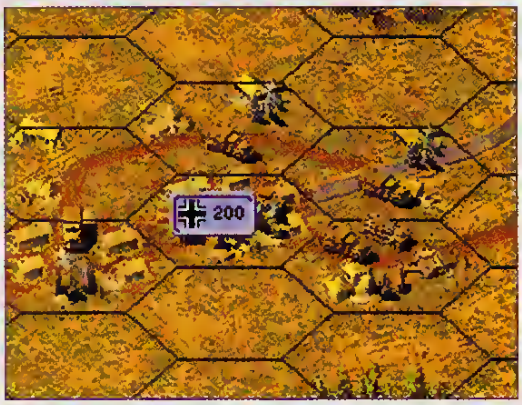
DIFFICULTY LEVEL: BEGINNER / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

Frontal Assault

TalonSoft's Reach Exceeds Its Latest Engine's Grasp

by Loyd Case

EAST FRONT—an ambitious game that depicts small-unit actions in detail during the immense struggle for Mother Russia during World War II—seems to be a wargamer's dream title. The new game engine (though still turn-based) is now fully 32-bit and Windows 95-optimized. The maps are dynamically generated using a terrain tiling system in the campaign, and as you play through the game you run into quite a variety of terrain and weather. There are 49 historical scenarios (including a siege-oriented scenario created by veteran game-designer Jim Dunnigan) and three tutorial scenarios. Despite all this, however, the EAST FRONT experience falls well short of being that of a great game.



HEX AGONY In most games, these infantry units would have trouble with Soviet tanks, but not in EAST FRONT.

GROGNARD LITE

The interface in EAST FRONT is quite similar to the one used in TalonSoft's BATTLEGROUND series, but now there's a nifty database of unit types that you access by the use of hotkeys. There's also a new toolbar at the bottom of the screen that's less intimidating than that of earlier TalonSoft games. The only issue I have with the interface is the use of a modal switch between fire and movement. You learn quickly to hold the Ctrl key down to enter fire mode; it's altogether too easy to press the "next turn" button, which is adjacent to the move/fire mode button on the toolbar.

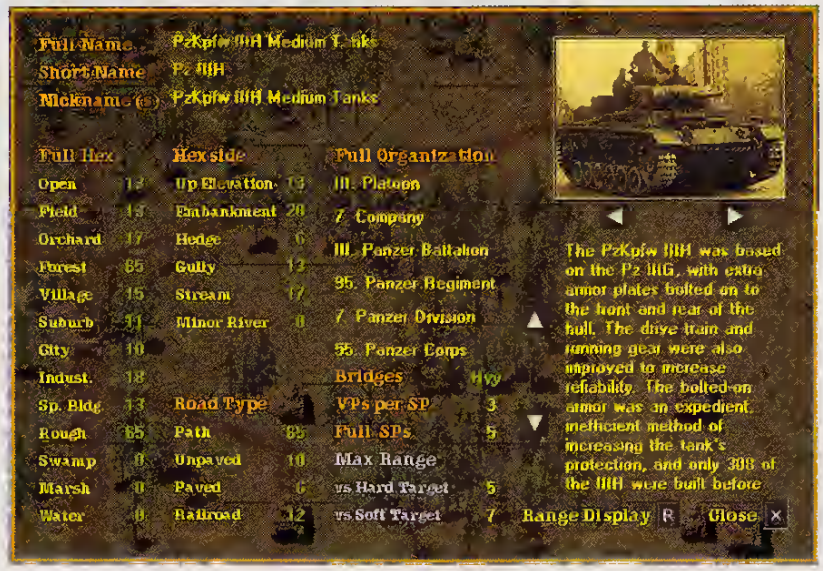
Each unit represents a platoon or battery of artillery. You must call in both indirect artillery fire and air strikes a turn ahead, and you have a limited number of air strikes available in a given battle. Movement of all unit types is pretty straightforward, whether you use the mouse or the keyboard. There are quite a few hotkey equivalents, which are conveniently printed on the back of the manual.

Speaking of the manual, it's very thin, and barely scratches the surface of how to play the game. For example, supply is handled through the use of HQ units, yet there's almost no discussion of how these rules work. The READ ME file contains some additional information, as do the tutorials. Still, there's far too little information, especially when you contrast EAST FRONT's manual with the one included in CLOSE COMBAT 2, another recent WWII small-unit game (see the review elsewhere in this section).

There are some troubling design features as well. If you thought infantry was useless in STEEL PANTHERS, be prepared for the opposite problem in EAST FRONT. The German infantry in particular is so extraordinarily tough as to be quite unrealistic. Several times I attempted assaults with multiple armor platoons on single, often severely damaged, German infantry units in open terrain, only to get a bloody nose in the process.



Price: $49.95 (street)
Minimum System Requirements: 486 DX (Pentium 133 or better strongly recommended), Windows 95, 8MB RAM (16-32MB recommended), 16-bit high-color SVGA graphics, 2x CD-ROM (4x recommended), mouse; supports Win 95-compatible sound cards.
Multiplayer Support: Hotseat, email, LAN, and Internet (2 players).
Designers: John Tiller, Bob McNamara, and Charlie Kibler
Publisher: TalonSoft
Forest Hill, MD
(800) 211-6504
www.talonsoft.com
Distributor: Broderbund Software, Inc.
Novato, CA
(415) 382-4400
www.broderbund.com



STALINGRAD SNAPSHOT The extensive WWII database is just a keypress away.

Certainly the quality of Russian units early in the war may have been questionable, but this occurred even with the Soviet Guards armored units in the 1944 scenarios!

The use of leaders is also interesting, but the implementation is flawed. It's great that leaders can rally disrupted units, but leaders alone in clear terrain shouldn't be able to fend off multiple SMG platoons.

A SCENARIO FOR ALL SEASONS

The real strength of EAST FRONT lies in its numerous historical scenarios. The timetable ranges from the opening of Barbarossa through Operation Citadel (Kursk) up to the desperate retreats of 1944. Since the scenarios are precreated, the starting positions tend to follow the historical deployments.

Some of the battles are *big*. *Dead End on the Road to Kursk*, for example, is a 30-turn scenario with hundreds of units. When I played the Germans, it took the AI 35 minutes to complete the opening turn *on a 266MHz Pentium II with 64MB of RAM!* Even when playing smaller scenarios, you should plan on having something else to do when the computer is moving, as it does "think" for quite a while.

Overall, EAST FRONT is a mixed bag. It's a very ambitious and interesting title that was simply shipped too soon. It's probably worth getting for the historical scenarios, but the campaign engine needs work (see the sidebar). There are other nice touches, such as the oversized hexes, in which you can actually see all of the "stacked" units—which makes the job of searching for specific unit types in a large firefight much easier. The use of Action Points makes the issue of artificial overrun rules moot. Each unit has 100 action points (which get used at different rates by different unit types). As long as the active unit has sufficient action points it can continue to move, fire, or assault.

EAST FRONT also ships with a terrific scenario editor. You can edit existing scenarios or create your own (including maps). It's one of the most flexible and easy-to-use editors I've seen in some time. Finally, there are extensive two-player options.

Still, all of the good things about EAST FRONT can't hide its many problems. As of press time, TalonSoft has released two patches and additional documentation that fix some of the problems, but seem to have created others. If, like me, you are captivated enough by the historical period to try EAST FRONT despite its shortcomings, be aware that the game is still very much a work in progress.

APPEAL: Aficionados of WWII tactical combat who have a lot of patience.

PROS: Gorgeous graphics; numerous historical scenarios; a great scenario editor.

CONS: Flawed campaign battle-generator; *uber-mensch* infantry; incredible amount of time for AI moves; weak manual.

CG RATED

Campaign Follies





CGW CHOICE

DIFFICULTY LEVEL: ADVANCED

Off to Market

Real-time Wargaming Comes of Age

by Patrick C. Miller

CLOSE COMBAT A BRIDGE TOO FAR isn't a game to be played so much as *experienced* You experience disappointment when an attack bogs down for lack of armor support, frustration when troops under fire refuse to obey orders, and remorse when heroes of earlier battles are mercilessly cut down by enemy machine-gun fire. Yet you also have feelings of elation when victory is achieved against insurmountable odds, satisfaction as tactics start to click, and accomplishment after completing a difficult campaign

GARDEN OF DEATH

Operation Market Garden began on September 17, 1944, when thousands of American, British, and Polish paratroopers were dropped into Holland to seize a series of bridges along a 60 mile corridor. The British 30th Corps attacked northward to link up with the paratroopers. If the operation had gone as planned, it would have enabled the Allies to cross the Rhine River at Arnhem and attack Germany itself, possibly ending the war in Europe before Christmas. Unfortunately, the Allies ignored intelligence reports indicating the presence of two German SS armored divisions in and around their drop zones.

Given the questionable decision to have 30th Corps attack up a single, easily defended road—and the fact that the Germans captured the complete Allied battle plan—it's a wonder the operation came as close to success as it did. In the end, Market Garden cost the Allies 17,000 casualties without achieving the objective of capturing a bridge over the Rhine at Arnhem. Of course, one of the main reasons we play wargames is to change history... Good luck. If you think you can do better than the historical commanders, here's your chance.



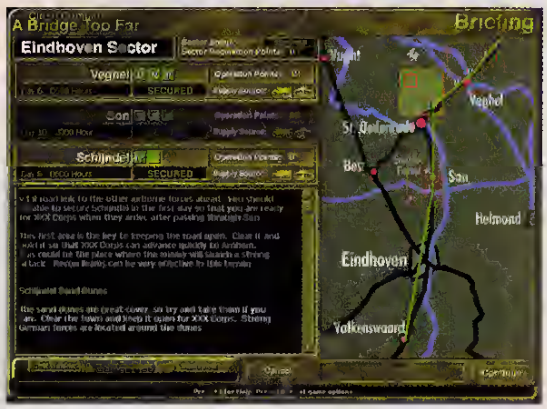
RIPCORD AWAY!

Based on Operation Market Garden during World War II, this game delivers the pressure, tension, and drama of tactical warfare at close range. Plus, it's all done on extraordinarily detailed maps, in 16-bit color. Real-time gameplay combines with an emphasis on troop morale, physical and mental states, and battle experience to propel A BRIDGE TOO FAR into the realm of realistic combat simulation. Although turn-based wargames will always be popular, they can't compete with A BRIDGE TOO FAR in providing a sense of what it must be like to command individual soldiers in combat



TOY SOLDIERS Unlike the original CLOSE COMBAT, even the zoomed-in view of A BRIDGE TOO FAR is useful. Check out the detail of the infantry and tanks!

Price: $54.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 90, Windows 95 or better, 16MB RAM, 45MB hard-drive space, SVGA graphics with 800x600 high-color (16-bit) resolution, 4x CD-ROM drive, mouse; supports Win 95-compatible sound cards. ***Macintosh:*** Power PC, System 7.5, 16MB RAM, 40MB hard-drive space, 800x600 graphics, 4x CD-ROM, mouse.
Multiplayer Support: TCP/IP, LAN, or 28.8Kbps modem (2 players). *Note:* Internet Gaming Zone available for Win 95/Windows NT users only.
Designer: Atomic Games
Publisher: Microsoft Corporation
Redmond, WA
(206) 882-8080
www.microsoft.com



LOGISTIC LOGIC In the campaign game, you must decide which sectors of the operation are the most crucial and should receive the greatest amount of supplies.

When Microsoft released CLOSE COMBAT more than a year ago, there was nothing quite like it on the market. The designers at Atomic Games have now raised that standard even further by smoothing CLOSE COMBAT's rough edges. This time, the company has included features that not only add variety and improve gameplay, but also provide a significant amount of long-term replay value—one of the original game's greatest shortcomings.

From a gameplay perspective, A BRIDGE TOO FAR isn't all that different from CLOSE COMBAT. The emphasis remains on tactical engagements between infantry sections and individual vehicles. However, many of the changes implemented in the sequel have made what was a good game outstanding. The interface is more responsive and intuitive. Map scrolling is smoother. There are more units and more missions (and greater mission variety). You can edit missions with the Battlemaker feature to design new scenarios (although there is no way to create additional maps). The game's stronger strategic element provides more depth to the dynamic campaign, and modem-to-modem play has been added. Also, network play is more stable than before.

The game comes with 33 battles, which can be played separately or as part of 11 multibattle operations. There are three campaigns, based on battles in the Eindhoven, Nijmegen, and Arnhem sectors. The ultimate challenge is the grand campaign that requires players to manage units and allocate resources in all three sectors. When you play as the Allies, the key is to capitalize on the element of surprise and then defend supply zones and bridges until 30th Corps arrives. The Germans must make the enemy paratroopers pay a high price for their initial gains while minimizing their own losses until an armored counterattack can be launched. As was the case historically, the strategic situation favors the Germans.

APPEAL: Gamers looking for a realistic, tactical-level combat simulation.

PROS: A wide range of battles on highly detailed maps; 130 different units; a dynamic campaign with strategic depth; realistic tactical combat; scenario editor; multiplayer support.

CONS: A few minor bugs; no map editor; no interior walls; you can't face soldiers in a particular direction.

CGW RATED

HITTING THE DIRT

The game isn't that difficult to play, but it is tough to master. There are only seven commands: move, move fast, sneak, fire, fire smoke, hide, and defend. Giving unit orders is fairly simple; you use either a mouse-activated menu or keyboard commands. Some players have a hard time getting used to the combat stress psychological model that can cause units to act on their own initiative. Occasionally, this results in heroic behavior, but more often, self-preservation instincts prevail. Players must also develop effective tactics and small-unit strategies to have any hope for success when playing at the higher degrees of realism.

Not all changes made were for the better, nor is the game without some minor flaws. Because soldiers are larger, buildings no longer have the interior walls that sometimes made for interesting indoor firefights. The game replay feature is gone, as is the ability to give units orders to defend or face in a specific direction. Although some buildings in the game are designed to allow vehicles to enter them, there are bugs in the game that sometimes enable a tank or antitank gun to get the benefit of being on top of a multilevel building. Tanks sometimes have problems deciding which way to face. As a result, a tank's hull sometimes appears to be doing the rumba with its turret.



LINE OF FRIGHT While line-of-sight to a target isn't always visually obvious, the game's intuitive interface makes it a snap to determine.

Fans of turn-based wargames might be inclined to write off A BRIDGE TOO FAR as a simplistic real-time clickfest or yet another effort that sacrifices gameplay for eye candy. But they would be very wrong in that assessment, for A BRIDGE TOO FAR is an engrossing affair; one in which you can easily become immersed for hours. No other game can touch it for conveying the sights, sounds, and feel of combat at the butt-end of a rifle.

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Computer Gaming World, June '97
★★★★

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Computer Games Strategy Plus, June '97
★★★★

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PC Magazine, June '97
★★★★

"...hard-core gamers will appreciate the flexibility offered in the computer version."
Newsweek, April '97

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Pax Nausea



This Ambitious Trip in the Final Frontier Is Fraught With Problems

by Tim Carter

As any intergalactic traveler will tell you, a key element of space exploration is communication: the creation and management of a consistent flow of information. PAX IMPERIA 2, the long-awaited sequel to the popular Macintosh product, gives gamers virtually everything they could ask for in a space-based strategy game . . . except decent communication. The designers have left out or obfuscated the flow of information within the game's interface to the point that it seriously hampers your ability to enjoy the game.

NEW FRONTIERS

PAX IMPERIA 2 offers a package of options and challenges similar to that of MASTER OF ORION 2, with the addition of a real-time interface. Frankly, I'm not sure that realtime works well for a grand strategy game. Why should a galactic emperor be rushed, when turns are measured in years rather than minutes? Also, with many things going on in disparate parts of the galaxy, it's easy to miss an important event or activity—to the detriment of your empire.

Which brings up the question of information. PAX IMPERIA 2 has many interesting features: a decent technology tree, some good economic options, and many more espionage and "black ops" opportunities than in similar games. Most of these features, however, are poorly explained and are difficult to use properly.

The manual is so sparse that you will be left guessing about many aspects of gameplay. Further, no list of technology, ship design, or colony buildings is provided.

Also, there is little opportunity to cross-reference information. For instance, zooming in on a planet allows you to pull up a menu of the buildings available for construction. Unfortunately, it doesn't tell you what any of them do. To get that information, you have to go back to the technology management screen, then go back to the planet in question to give your orders.



THE GOOD AND BAD While PAX has plenty of options and depth, it's skimpy on information and requires far too much micromanagement.

TEDIUM AD INFINITUM

The game's interface makes your development either tedious (if you micromanage it) or boring (if you let the computer handle things). Defensive installations are also a drag, as they cannot be ordered in advance. You must return to each planet after each construction to give new orders. As you aren't prompted when each installation is finished, you have to check regularly—lest your border colonies revert to economically inclined production.

If a planet has all of the buildings available at your current technology level, it will do nothing unless specifically ordered to do something—even if there are orbital systems available for construction.

Another problem stems from the random setup. Because the map consists of a relatively small set (the default is 20) of interlinked planets, with only a few wormholes between them, your initial exploration is generally predetermined by the map. Yet, the random setup does not include a basic algorithm for separating players at the beginning of the game.

Once in a while, this "feature" worked to my advantage by pitting AI races against each other early on, and giving me relatively unchecked reign over other parts of the galaxy.

Tactical combat, supposedly a major part of the game, is actually quite dull. If you have the right number of superior ships, you'll win. If you don't, you'll lose. As defensive technologies progress faster than offensive technologies, the middle game often plays out like World War I: lots of pointless attacks, little progress.

Many of these problems could be fixed through a tighter interface and better documentation. Right now, PAX IMPERIA 2 feels like an unfinished product with considerable potential but little polish. It looks and sounds good, but can't deliver a consistently enjoyable gaming experience.

APPEAL: Strategy gamers looking for depth who don't mind a rude awakening to realtime.

PROS: Good depth; lots of options; good espionage system.

CONS: Appallingly bad information management; bad AI; weak tactical system; realtime seems pointless.

CG RATED ★★★½



Price: $49.95
Minimum System Requirements: 486DX/100 (P133 recommended), 16MB RAM, Windows 95, 155MB hard-drive space, 2x CD-ROM drive (6x recommended), Windows 95-compatible sound card and mouse
Multiplayer Support: Modem (2 players), LAN, Internet (2–16 players)
Designer: Heliotrope Studios
Publisher: THQ
Calabasas, CA
(818) 591-1310
www.thq.com

DIFFICULTY LEVEL: ADVANCED

Mind Your Own Business

Wanna Be the Next Bill Gates? Here's Your Chance

by Scott A. May

Ah, the life of a computer company CEO. What could be easier? Brain surgery, for starters. If you've ever wondered whether you've got what it takes to become the next Bill Gates or Steve Jobs, let Stardock's ENTREPRENEUR be your proving ground. But be warned: The job ain't what it's cracked up to be.

In a nutshell, ENTREPRENEUR is a game of global economic domination, much like I-Magic's CAPITALISM or Tsunami's FREE ENTERPRISE. Believe it or not, Stardock Systems—until now premier OS/2 game designers—actually likens the game to Electronic Arts' legendary M.U.L.E. The difference is in the game's focus.

In ENTREPRENEUR, you're the CEO of a multinational computer manufacturer, competing against up to eight similar high-tech companies for worldwide market share. Although a PC product line is your only option at present, Stardock promises to add more diverse markets in the future. But for now, you'll have your hands full just learning to survive in the cut-throat world of high-tech high finances.



Price: $49.95
Minimum System Requirements: 486DX4/75 (Pentium recommended), Windows 95/NT 4.0 or OS/2 4.0, 12M8 RAM (16M8 recommended), 10M8 hard-drive space, DirectX-compatible SVGA-graphics video card (DIVE-compatible for DS/2), DirectX- or DART- (DS/2) compatible sound card, mouse, IPX connection for multiplayer games
Multiplayer Support: Modem (2 players), LAN, Internet (2–8 players).
Designer: Brad Wardell
Publisher: Stardock Systems
Livonia, MI
(888) 782-7362
www.stardock.com

STARTUP ENTERPRISES

You begin the game by choosing your area of expertise: manufacturing, marketing, or research. The choice you make essentially doubles your potential advantage in that area. You then pick names for your company and CEO. By default, you compete against three computer-controlled companies with satirical names such as Mitrosoft, LaST, and Itty Bitty Machines (IBM). It's a big world, but three competitors is plenty for starters. As you gain experience and become bored with winning, you can increase the number of competing companies to a maximum of seven. Other factors determine the game's overall challenge, including five difficulty levels, seven game speeds, and the ability to adjust your initial startup funds. Finally, the game offers a choice of 12 different worlds in which to compete, ranging from the entire globe to only the United States. Plus, several fictitious maps are thrown in for good measure.

LEARNING THE ROPES

The game unfolds on a scrolling global map, which is divided into regions. Icon button bars line the bottom and right side of the screen, providing instant access to market share, demographic data (both global and regional), bar graphs, and pie charts. A color-coded overview map and winning bar lets you see at a glance how well your company is faring. Market news periodically flashes across the top of the screen, while a status bar at the bottom tracks your current assets and time line.

The gameplay is in accelerated real-time. Basic tasks include researching regional demographics, manufacturing your product, and tweaking several of its



RISKY BUSINESS Balancing production, marketing, and research—with one eye on the bottom line—is ENTREPRENEUR's biggest challenge and greatest reward.

attributes: rehability, aesthetics, ease of use, performance, and prestige. If customers aren't clamoring for your product, you create demand by using a variety of marketing tools If demand is high, you must step up production by hiring more employees and building bigger factories. When consumers become dissatisfied with your product, you must invest money into research to improve your PCs' key components and match consumer desires.

All the while, you have to keep a sharp eye on the bottom line to assure that you're not spending more than you're making. It's a nonstop balancing act and, despite the game's placid outward demeanor, it can be totally nerve-racking. Consumer confidence slips, employee morale nose-dives, careless expansion prevents you from upgrading existing facilities, markets fluctuate or tumble, and so on. There are so many factors to juggle, you'll be as bald and ulcer-ridden as a real-life CEO in no time. Welcome to the big leagues.



FUD SLINGING You can launch sometimes distasteful campaigns to discredit your opponents or erode consumer confidence in their products.



BUSINESS AS USUAL ENTREPRENEUR's graphics are serviceable, but could have used some multimedia seasoning to lure potential CEOs.

THAT'S NOT ALL!

Direct Action Cards represent the dark side of corporate strategy. Players earn cards based on their accumulated resource pool. The primary purpose of these cards is to trump your opponents when they've grown too powerful. If your chief competitor is gaining market share, you can play a card that announces a legal suit over copyright infringements and watch consumer confidence in their product tumble. Or you can use a card to lure a key executive away from the competition. Dirty tricks? You bet. This is war, after all.

In single-player mode, the game is constantly challenging, thanks to an aggressive, take-no-prisoners AI. Subtle and merciless, the AI will relentlessly blast you with marketing FUD (fear, uncertainty, and doubt). And just when you think you have your computer opponent on the ropes, it will aim a campaign at your strongest regions. As in real life, market volatility means the tide can turn repeatedly throughout a single game. Multiplayer mode is even more fun. Up to eight would-be tycoons can compete via LAN connection or over the Internet (using Stardock.net). Logging on and creating or joining an online game is a breeze.

THE EXTRAS

Game graphics are clean, yet extremely simplistic (almost shareware quality). Beyond the map's animated water and the constantly updated market data, most game screens are static, with little or no ambient sound. Unfortunately, this is exactly the kind of game that needs some multimedia window dressing to liven things up and draw new players into the action. Navigating the game's numerous production, marketing, and research screens also takes time to master, but after several games, it becomes second nature.

Despite its share of grammatical and factual errors, the game's documentation is well-written and personable. The designers obviously live and breathe this stuff, because the manual for the game continues to pitch the product, even though you've already purchased it.

In addition to point-by-point descriptions of each game element, the manual also includes a nice walkthrough, which takes great strides to acclimate newcomers to the gaming system. Although the basics of gameplay are not terribly complicated, the learning curve here is still substantially steep. In many ways, it's almost better if you have no economic background. That way, you aren't attempting to apply real-world economics to the game's slightly skewed, simplified model.

In the end, ENTREPRENEUR is much more fun than a spreadsheet, but it takes almost as long to fully learn. Patience is definitely a virtue here, but tenacious gamers will be rewarded with a fun inside peek at the sink-or-swim world of business strategy.

APPEAL: Real-time strategy fans with a flair for corporate economics.

PROS: Outstanding computer AI; addictive gameplay; effortless multiplayer setup; good sense of humor.

CONS: Graphics are bone dry; steep learning curve; interface could use a bit of tweaking.

CG RATED ★★★★

DIFFICULTY LEVEL: EASY / INTERMEDIATE / ADVANCED

Winds of Change

Stormy Combat Game Brings New Energy to Real-Time Strategy

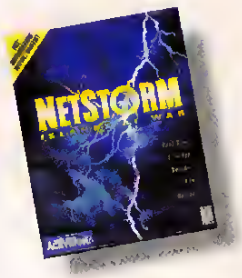
by Tahsin Shamma

A discussion of the recent weather forecast may be fine for small talk, but find a room filled with real-time gamers and any talk of a NETSTORM is likely to bring more than just plain chitchat. NETSTORM is a game like no other. It invigorates a genre that some feel is becoming too repetitive. Yet its originality risks alienating real-time gamers who are just settling into the traditional WARCRAFT 2 game design.

A word of advice. NETSTORM can intrigue and enthrall you, if you're willing to accept the fact that real-time strategy games are not all the same. The only game that I can recall with a similar feel was Atari's RAMPART (an arcade game of castle-building and cannon-firing).



HOLY DEFENSES, BATMAN! This altar is well defended by Wind Towers and Crossbows. The goal of each mission is to sacrifice enemy Priests here.



Price: $46.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 90, Windows 95, 16MB RAM, 15MB hard-drive space, 2x CD-ROM drive, SVGA VLB or PCI video card with 1MB RAM, Sound Blaster-compatible sound card, Microsoft-compatible mouse
Multiplayer Support: Modem (2 players), LAN, Internet (2–8 players)
Designer: Titanic Entertainment
Publisher: Activision
Los Angeles, CA
(800) 477-3650
www.activision.com

STORM OVER NIMBUS

NETSTORM takes place in the mythical world of Nimbus. The world is divided into three "spheres" of interaction: the Serenisphere, a heaven in which players match up for Net battles; the Pyrosphere, the island-laden arena in which players engage in combat, and the Deusphere, the lowest realm, from which the Furies hurl up Storm Geysers to fuel the battles above. Of these spheres, players will enter only the first two; the third, where the Furies of Wind, Rain, and Thunder battle, is an imaginary realm whose sole purpose is to provide atmosphere and backstory.

Players begin on floating islands in the Pyrosphere and must construct bridges to launch assaults against others. This may seem like an unnecessary addition to the gameplay, but it enhances strategic thinking, as no two bridges may overlap. Thus, it is possible to cripple an enemy just by cutting off his avenues of construction. If enemy bridges surround a player, he can't extend his own bridges to attack other players.

RESOURCES AND CONSTRUCTION

Players have the ability to harvest the energy brought up in Storm Geysers as Storm Crystals. The crystals provide Storm Power that is used to construct weapons, buildings, and units, as well as to cast spells. Players use their Storm Power through the single High Priest, an avatarlike unit in gameplay. The High Priest is the only unit capable of constructing buildings — including the all-important temple, which allows players to harness Storm Power and radiates the necessary power for building units. The fact that only priests can construct buildings might seem as if it would hinder construction, but there are really only two buildings that need to be built to start any game.

Once players build a temple, the workshop fulfills the role of the traditional "barracks" site. The workshop offers various unit types, including "generator" units that allow you to extend the range of your temple's Storm Power.

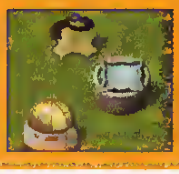
What Does *This* Do?

NETSTORM's new units may seem odd and difficult to handle at first, but a quick glance at a unit's design demonstrates its usefulness.

Crossbow: Due to its wide field of fire and rapid reloading, the crossbow is great as an assault weapon or a defensive post to fend off aerial attackers.



Aerial Attack Units: These units are the "bombers" of NETSTORM. Their extremely long range and medium attack strength help soften up defenses.



Cannons: The Ice cannons and Thunder cannons have great power but fixed facing. This makes the weaker, but more versatile, Sun cannon more useful.



COMBAT IN THE CLOUDS

In NETSTORM, placement is the supreme factor when deciding what to build and how to attack an opponent. In other games, a mobile unit is built and ordered around. But in this game, every combat unit is autonomous, with the exception of transports. If you place a weapon on the ground, it attacks a target in its own way, without waiting for instruction. So in effect, the placement of units determines how successful they are. The ultimate goal is to capture the opponent's priest and sacrifice him on an altar. Once you kill him, you will gain the dead priest's knowledge and Storm Power. In this way, you increase your own Priest's skills.

For those who are willing to brave the unique gameplay and keep their minds open to a new version of real-time gaming, NETSTORM is quite a find. But this creative brainstorm still lacks some simple elements.

The biggest drawback is the absence of a save-game feature for the single-player campaign. The campaign proceeds in three parts, in addition to a tutorial that instructs players in placing units and gathering Storm Power. The early missions in the campaign are fast enough that you don't notice the lack of a save feature, but the later missions, some of which last two hours, practically demand it. Combine this oversight with a lack of difficulty settings, and campaigns become a do-or-die feat.



GET PAST THIS! This shot shows your buildings and the bridge pieces you use to connect to Storm Geysers.

There are a few other unrealistic elements in the gameplay as well. If a section of an extended bridge between land and an attached unit is destroyed, the rest of the bridge hangs in midair, along with any units attached to it. The selection of bridge tiles is also too random for my tastes. In strategy games, you want as few variables as possible when fending off opponents. The randomized selection of bridge pieces sometimes makes you feel as if you are playing TETRIS.

All in all, NETSTORM is a good game and deserves high marks for demonstrating that all real-time games don't have to be alike. The drawbacks—especially the lack of a save-game feature—are annoying, but, on the whole, the game brings welcome new energy to a genre that is crowded with clones.

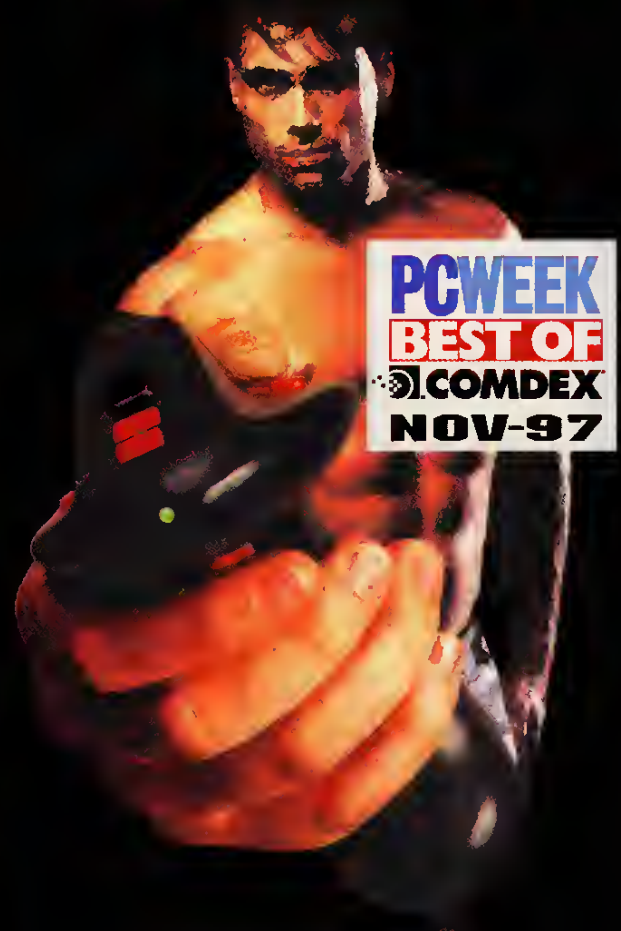
▶APPEAL: Real-time strategy gamers looking for an original game design.

▶PROS: Innovative combat style that demands new levels of strategic thinking.

▶CONS: No save-game feature or difficulty settings in single-player mode.

CG RATED ★★★½

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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: INTERMEDIATE

A Pale Shadow

Despite Grant and Sherman, This Battle Is Much Less Than Expected

by Jim Cobb

ROBERT E. LEE: CIVIL WAR GENERAL tried to ride that general's coattails through a PANZER GENERAL-style branching campaign, complete with simple combat mechanics and an emphasis on leadership. While it sold reasonably well, its attention to detail and graphic polish were lackluster compared to the award-winning TalonSoft BATTLEGROUND series. CIVIL WAR GENERALS 2 (CWG2), despite the addition of Grant and Sherman, is anything but an improvement.

HOME BEFORE THE LEAVES TURN

CWG2's strength lies in its campaigns: 17 of them (linking 45 different Civil War engagements) cover every aspect of the Eastern and Western theaters from both Union and Confederate perspectives. Depending on the degree of victory or defeat, you move from one conflict to the next, sometimes fighting alternatives to the historical battles. As in ROBERT E. LEE, you can dismiss inept leaders and reequip your units with the spoils of war; also, unit and leader qualities improve as they gain experience.

For all their drama, however, the campaigns have some problems. Sometimes an alternate battle occurs within hours of the first. How can leaders be dismissed and units be reequipped and brought back to full strength so quickly? Worse, some orders of battle are of questionable historical accuracy, such as the Iron Brigade being present at First Bull Run. While some of the regiments were there, the Iron Brigade, as such, didn't exist until 1862.

The combat system, too, has its ups and downs. Unit capabilities are a function of organization, health (strength), and morale. As the unit moves and fights, these values drop; adequate rest, supplies, and digging in improve them. Regimental and brigade leaders have ratings for health, initiative, organization, and ability to inspire loyalty. Divisional, corps, and army commanders can positively or negatively modify subordinate leaders' ratings. All in all, CWG2 does a good job of showing the intangibles of Civil War combat; and the variety of weapons systems—while less detailed than those of the BATTLEGROUND series—are modeled well enough.



NO TRUTH IN ADVERTISING Some campaigns are fun, while others are misleading. *Shiloh* leaves out Forts Henry and Donelson.

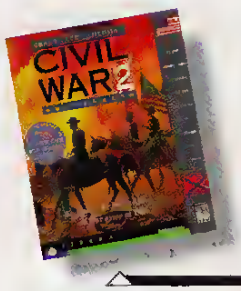
NOT SO SHARP SHOOTERS

It's a real shock, then, that CWG2's combat mechanics impale themselves on their own simplicity. Thirty minutes per turn at 200 yards per hex is a workable scale, but not when you have limited stacking. Only field artillery units can stack with other unit types. Thus, leaders are not only vulnerable but actually *block* movement, small numbers of sharpshooters handle like brigades; diminished regiments can't shelter with stronger units. Worse, infantry units don't have ranged fire, but must be adjacent to a target and attempt to close. The sequence of "attacker fire, defender morale check, defender fire, attacker morale check, close combat" works fine for a charge, but at 200 yards, units should be able to shoot without closing.

The variety of units in CWG2 is wasted, because nothing works as it should. Artillery, for example, employs ranged fire. But it can fire only once per turn, it can't support friendly units, and it can't both move and fire in a 30-minute turn. Likewise, the lack of skirmishers is a problem in this scale, and you can't fake it by using your sharpshooters in a skirmish role, because of the odd stacking rules.

The battles themselves are less conflicts of lines advancing or standing than they are unsupported units that simply charge ahead. The AI's propensity for making piecemeal attacks aggravates this feeling of a brawl. Thus, the combat system makes it impossible to win using historically authentic tactics.

In passing, it's only fair to mention that CWG2 does come with an easy-to-use scenario maker and a nice CD history of the war. It's a pity that these elements are wasted on a completely broken combat system and a dated game engine.



Price: $49.95 (street)
Minimum System Requirements: 486/66 (Pentium recommended), 16MB RAM, 52MB hard-drive space, Windows 3.1 or better, SVGA graphics, 2x CD-ROM (4x recommended), supports Sound Blaster-compatible sound cards
Multiplayer Support: Internet or LAN (2 players); requires 14.4Kbps modem, plus ISP or network.
Designer: Impressions Software
Publisher: Sierra On-Line, Inc. Bellevue, WA (800) 757-7707
www.sierra.com

▶APPEAL: Those who want to play Grant and Sherman, as well as Lee.

▶PROS: Branching campaign with interesting "alternate history" battles; nice scenario editor.

▶CONS: Tactical system bears only a vague resemblance to Civil War combat; dated engine; battles themselves aren't very interesting.

CGW RATED

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DIFFICULTY LEVEL: ADVANCED

Artificial Insanity

Anark's Evolution in Platform Games Will Drive You Crazy

by Mark Clarkson

GALAPAGOS is absolutely maddening. Even after all the hours I've spent playing the game, I'm hard-pressed to know what to make of it. The second most maddening thing about GALAPAGOS is its star, Mendel. Guiding Mendel through a level is like herding a blind cat through a booby-trapped maze with gentle words of encouragement—that is, it's just this side of impossible.

The gimmick is this. Mendel has a mind of his own. A nudge from the mouse may turn Mendel one direction or the other, but only if he is in the mood.

Now, most games have AI of some kind, but it is typically in the form of hard-coded instructions. Mendel's smarts, on the other hand, derive from a special kind of adaptive artificial intelligence called nonstationary entropic reduction mapping (NERM). He isn't programmed to do anything in particular; he learns from his environment.

Exactly what Mendel is learning is far from clear, but being repeatedly electrocuted or dropped into freezing lakes of liquid nitrogen by ham-handed players will certainly make him nervous. Soon, he'll refuse to go where you want him to go. He'll instead wander in hesitant circles, mewling plaintively and ignoring your frantic nudges.

IT'S UP TO YOU

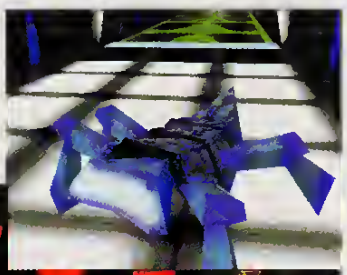
Mendel isn't called upon to solve the game's puzzles by himself—the real work is up to you. You must manipulate Mendel's 3D environment—think Super Escher World—and lead him to safety. To make a path, you might extrude platforms from a wall or synchronize flying blocks.

Clicking on some platforms pops Mendel upward, trampoline-style, while clicking on other platforms whisks him from floor to floor as if he were on flying elevators. Hidden shortcuts allow you to bypass chunks of the puzzle by performing especially intricate sequences of moves. And there are always assorted electrifying fields, crushing blocks, freezing lakes, and fatal falls awaiting Mendel. Items deadly to Mendel are often out of sight until the instant they kill him, which brings us to GALAPAGOS' most maddening feature: the damned swooping camera.

The camera follows Mendel through the level, tagging along behind for a while, then flying past him, or shooting heavenward for a different angle. Since you have no control over the camera (and precious little control over Mendel), you're pretty much restricted to seeing only what's shown to you.

Clicking on a switch may be a simple task, but getting Mendel into position so that you can *see* the switch in the first place is often quite a trick. And even if that switch is holding still in the game world, your view is circling. Hitting hotspots as they plunge madly across your screen can be a real challenge. This is obviously by design, but it may limit the appeal of this game, as many who might be attracted to GALAPAGOS' puzzles could be put off by this emphasis on eye/mouse coordination.

Those souls brave enough to try it will find that GALAPAGOS is a lovely and innovative game. It made good use of my Intense 3D Voodoo Rush card, with scrolling textures and nifty fog effects. And while I'll admit that GALAPAGOS frequently made me scream out loud in frustration, I also found the game so addictive that I couldn't stop playing it.





FLY ON A WALL. Whether viewed during normal gameplay or in close-up, Mendel appears as a sort of technopunk insectoid. You'll have to decide for yourself if his AI is equal to that of a terrestrial ant.



Price: $29.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 90, Windows 95, 16MB RAM, 10MB hard-drive space, DirectX 5.0-compatible video card supporting 640x480 and 256 colors, 2x CD-ROM, mouse; supports DirectX 5.0-compatible sound cards.
***Macintosh*:** Power PC 90, System 7, 16MB RAM, 10MB hard-drive space, 640x480 and 256-color graphics, 2x CD-ROM; mouse.
Multiplayer Support: None
Designer: Anark Game Studios
Publisher: Electronic Arts, San Mateo, CA, (800) 245-4525
www.ea.com

APPEAL: Fans of fast-action puzzle games looking for something different.

PROS: Nifty 3D graphics; novel AI; addictive, challenging gameplay.

CONS: Swooping camera requires better than average eye/mouse coordination; very frustrating at times.

CGW RATED ★★★★

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★★★½ **REVIEW • BOGGLE**



Bogglicious

Hasbro Adapts Another Classic for CD-ROM

by Charlotte Panther

Are you looking for a way to spice up those monotonous family gatherings? Need to inject a little competitive energy into your workplace? Maybe you just want an outlet to show off your superior spelling skills? Whatever the reason, any would-be wordsmith will find himself instantly addicted to Hasbro's adaptation of the classic word game, BOGGLE.

The game follows the same premise as the original *Boggle*. The idea is to find as many words as possible in a limited time-period by connecting letters diagonally, vertically, or horizontally across a grid of letters. This time, though, there are five variations on the classic theme from which to choose.



GRISLY GRIDLOCK Placing the letters in the intended slot on the grid proves to be frustrating in *Battle Boggle*

The first one, *Classic Boggle*, plays exactly like the original game. You can compete against up to three other players, either by hotseat, LAN, or Internet. The latter two work really well—all of the contestants are able to work out their words concurrently, without worrying about which words the other players are forming. At the end of the round, the computer subtracts any duplicate words from players' lists and adds up the final score to declare a winner.

Hotseat *should* be the perfect way to play this game—four crazy people vying to come up with the best word. The fact that everyone crowds around one computer certainly adds to the atmosphere, but there is one major flaw. If you repeat a word that has already been used, both you *and* the originator of the word lose points. This would be fine in a situation where you couldn't see your opponents making their moves, but it makes little sense in hotseat play, in which half the fun is screaming about what your rival just did. If one player makes a particularly high-scoring word, there's nothing (short of blindfolding everyone) to stop the next player from reusing the same word and voiding both players' points.

MIND-BOGGLING

The four alternative versions of the game include *Breakaway Boggle*, which consists of a 4x4x4 cube that you can rotate to help create longer words. As you use each letter, it disappears, until words can no longer be made (or you run out of time).

In Your Face Boggle, one of the two single-player-only games, is best described as the wordsmith's TETRIS. The idea is to score as many words as possible as the clock counts down. Every 20 to 30 seconds the blocks of letters creep one step closer toward you. The game ends when the letters are so close to you that they're... well... in your face.

In *Space Boggle*, you form words by clicking on individual letters that float toward you like asteroids. *Space Boggle* shouts out for a multiplayer mode. This really would have been great as a fast-paced click-in round—sort of like YOU DON'T KNOW JACK's *Jack Attack*—a race to form the words before your opponent can.

Last, and, unfortunately, least, is *Battle Boggle*. In this two-player round, you and your opponent strategically place individual letters onto a grid, in an order that allows for the most possible words to be created. The layout of the grid makes it frustratingly difficult to drop letters into their intended squares, and if you do misplace a letter, there is no undo feature.

Graphically, BOGGLE is functional, rather than inspired, and lacks the pizzazz of some of Hasbro's earlier titles, such as SCRABBLE and RISK. Despite its foibles, though, this is still a better than average game—particularly when played multiplayer. It features a customizable dictionary, offers plenty of variety within each game-type, includes two levels of difficulty, and is devilishly addictive. Word-puzzle fans will not be disappointed.



Price: $29.95
Minimum System Requirements: 486/66 (Pentium 75 recommended), Windows 95, 12MB RAM, 11MB hard-drive space, SVGA graphics, 2x CD-ROM, supports Sound Blaster- or Windows-compatible sound card.
Multiplayer Support: Internet, LAN, or Hotseat (1–4 players).
Publisher: Hasbro Interactive
Beverly, MA
(508) 921-3700
www.hasbro.com

▶APPEAL: Wordsmiths who want to expand (or show off) their vocabulary.

▶PROS: Competitive multiplayer modes; good variation; customizable dictionary.

▶CONS: Easy to cheat at *Classic Boggle* when playing hotseat; two of the game-types lack multiplayer mode; interface of *Battle Boggle* is frustrating.

CG RATED

Bad Lands

Scorpia Gets Her Claws on LANDS OF LORE: GUARDIANS OF DESTINY, *and She's Not Happy*



LANDS OF LORE GUARDIANS OF DESTINY is Westwood's long-delayed sequel to its popular adventure-RPG of 1994. It's the story of Luther, son of Scotia, whom we dispatched in the first LORE. Luther has several problems. For one, he's cursed by random transformations into other forms. Without warning, he may become either a beast or a lizard. The beast form is slow, ponderous, and nonmagical. It is, however, a ferocious fighter of great power. The lizard form is small, weak, and not a fighting critter. On the other hand, it is extremely fast and can cast magic spells. The problem is that Luther has no control over these forms, and he can morph into them at any time.

His other problem is that the Gladstone guards are after him to put him back in prison. As the game begins, Luther has just made his escape and is on the run to consult the Draracle about ridding himself of the curse. It will be a long and difficult trail before he is able to do that.

SOLO MIO

GUARDIANS OF DESTINY is a single-person, real-time, 3D game. There is no party of characters, nor does anyone join Luther, even temporarily. It's strictly a solo adventure.

In the lower-right corner is a portrait of Luther, plus icons for your weapon and current spell, along with a blue bar for mana and a red one for health. Clicking on the portrait brings up the inventory box, which displays everything you're carrying, as well as which weapons, armor, and miscellaneous items you have.

At the top right of the inventory screen are four bars that measure your fighting strength and armor protection. As your abilities improve over time, these bars become longer. Various equipped items can affect these stats, making them better or worse. Clicking on the bars switches them with the level gain bars, one for magic and one for combat. All these stats are visual only—as in the first LANDS OF LORE, no actual numbers are used for strength, mana, or hit points.

Combat is a simple procedure. Luther faces his foe, and you click either the weapon icon (to swing or shoot missiles) or the magic icon (to cast a spell). The spells come in sets of four, when Luther learns a spell, he gets the whole set at once. To cast a spell beyond the first, you can hit 2–4 on the number keys, or target the opponent with the mouse and hold the right mouse button until the desired spell is reached.

Conversation in the game is extremely limited. Typically, as Luther approaches someone with something to say, talking begins automatically. There are no choices to make; everything said by both parties is entirely prerecorded.

GUARDIANS has an excellent automap. As usual, it fills in as you go along, and you can bring it up for viewing at any time with the Tab key. Some important locations will be noted automatically on the map. Others you can mark with note "spikes." You can click on a placed spike to reread your notes or add to them, or both. You can zoom in very close on the map to view a section in detail, or zoom out to see the general layout, this is a very handy feature.

WILD GOOSE CHASE

And that, unfortunately, is about the last good thing I

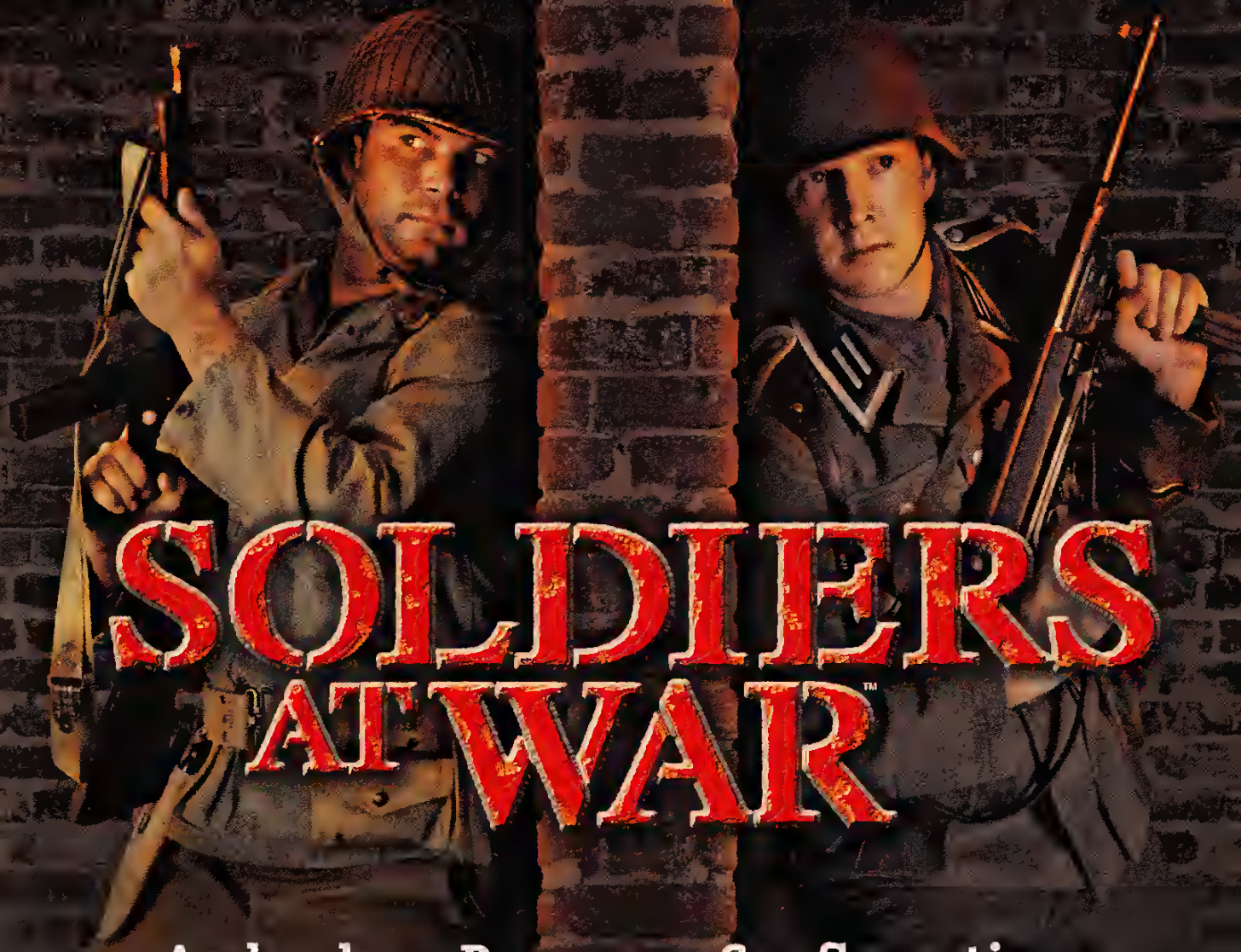


A BRIDGE TDD DUMB To get to Ruloi Citadel you'll have to climb platforms and run across a disappearing bridge. Platforms and bridges—just what people who fly really need

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have to say about GUARDIANS OF DESTINY As a game, it is a horror. Everything that could be put in to drag the game out, send you through repetitious exercises; force you to run, jump, and leap excessively, and make your life difficult has been included.

For example, you have to obtain a silver leaf from a graveyard Once there, you find an open building leading to underground crypts—the obvious starting point, since most of the other structures are locked So you go below and eventually come across a room with a claw statue and a glass bead The connection is blatant, and you charge the bead This opens a building upstairs, where you find more beads, which you charge to open more buildings for more beads, which you charge...well, you get the idea

Except, halfway through, you have to go to the Dracoid Ruins (a sunken city), a place that you reach by jumping along a pit in the jungle Once there, you look around until you find the second claw and charge a bead there, because the ones from the crypts won't do anymore How are you supposed to know to do this? Perhaps, after fruitless hours in the graveyard, it will come to you by osmosis or something

Anyway, you charge up the bead, return (happily, via teleporter) to the cemetery, and open another mausoleum, which controls another bead that opens into another section of the underground crypts. In this area, you find the third claw and charge up two more beads to open up the last two buildings Inside one structure, you talk to the ghost of a Dracoid Priest That's if you found the item you need to do this in the Ruins, otherwise, you have to go back there again and find it, presuming that you realize this is necessary

The priest has a favor to ask of you: He wants you to go into the ruins and bring back his remains so he can rest in peace. You do that, but still have found no silver leaf Instead, the priest directs you to have a chat with the ghost of the Dracoid Emperor Among other things, you will need one bead charged at each of the three claws to reach him

The Emperor has a request, too He wants you to bring his remains into the ruins, so he can destroy the city once and for all. And guess what, you're pretty much forced to witness the big event, after which you have just moments to escape before you are drowned You will likely drown several times before you figure out the exact sequences necessary to escape. This can't be avoided, as all other exits are blocked off, and you can't skip the video

After all that, you can hike back to the graveyard, have a final chat with the Emperor, and finally collect the silver leaf And this is still fairly early in the game Having fun yet?



ATTACK OF THE KILLER PIXELS Giant spiders are just one of the many creatures you'll face in GUARDIANS OF DESTINY



WELL, THE MAP IS GOOD One of GUARDIANS OF DESTINY's few redeeming features is a great, customizable automap.

PLATFORM FOLLIES

Here's another quick example of the game's



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manity You go to the citadel of the Ruloi because they have the Dreamstone you need to raise the Ancient City To reach the stone, you have to leap up the side of a structure, from platform to ledge to platform, 42 times The jumps are actually easy, and not especially dangerous, but they all have to be done



CHECK OUT MY STUFF You store goodies in the inventory slots above your character's head, and magic in the slots to the left

At the top, you'll find our old friend from PAGAN, the disappearing bridge It's a timed run—and I do mean run—to get across safely What's stupid about this is that the Ruloi fly People who fly everywhere in their home need jumping platforms and vanishing bridges the way a snake needs wheels

The list could go on and on, but I don't have enough room, and you don't have enough time, for the whole catalog Suffice it to say that this is what you go through for much of the game, only some of it is worse than the above example The basic rule for solving puzzles is this. If the answer isn't blatantly obvious, then try the stupidest, most idiotic, illogical, or outrageous thing you can think of—it will probably work

ENDGAME, AT LAST

But enough of that, let's talk about the Big Event, the showdown with Belial, which is what this all leads up to.

It's very difficult, and very frustrating It took me many tries to figure out the trick, and how to work it (That pool is important!) I was just glad I'd been lucky enough to have a supply of stone cubes with me at the time; without those, I don't know if it would have been possible to solve this puzzle. If you actually play and get this far, be sure to have some cubes with you

Finally, it was over. Belial dropped to his knees and keeled over dead My reaction was (among others), "It's about time!" and I sat back for the ending sequences. Going by the earlier FMVs, it was sure to be something spectacular

The scene changes to a hallway with doors. The Draracle comes in, opens one, and looks in on a bedroom where Luther and Dawn are having a romp under the blankets. I kid you not, this is the ending of the game. Not quite the type of climax we were expecting This may be satisfying for Luther, but not for anyone who persevered to the end.

Overall, LANDS OF LORE: GUARDIANS OF DESTINY is a disaster from start to finish. It combines the worst aspects of PAGAN ("Mario the Avatar") and THUNDERSCAPE ("the game without end"), along with some of the most nonsensical "puzzles" since LEGEND OF KYRANDIA I. GUARDIANS is not an RPG nor an adventure nor an action game, but a patchwork of all three, and a threadbare one at that. For any RPG-starved gamer, this one is a disappointment beyond words



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AHEAD 1

The tour guides are trying to kill you.
LOSE A TURN

A chess duel to the death. Now if you could just remember how to move the horsies.
LOSE A TURN



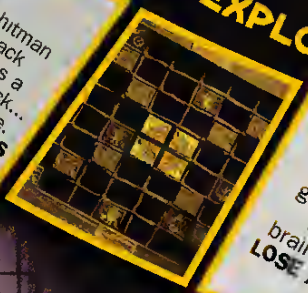
Congratulations! Once again, you've saved the world without anyone noticing.







The hitman is back and has a bone to pick... your clavicle.
LOSE 2 TURNS



A mad scientist gives you a wicked brain cramp.
LOSE A TURN

You match wits with a gorilla. Odds are slightly in you favor.
AHEAD 1/2

You bravely cross the Chasm of Death, despite having just eaten 2 macho burritos.
AHEAD 3

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You discover an ingenious solution to an ancient Anasazi mystery.
AHEAD 1



Unfortunately, you left it back at the office.
BACK 1



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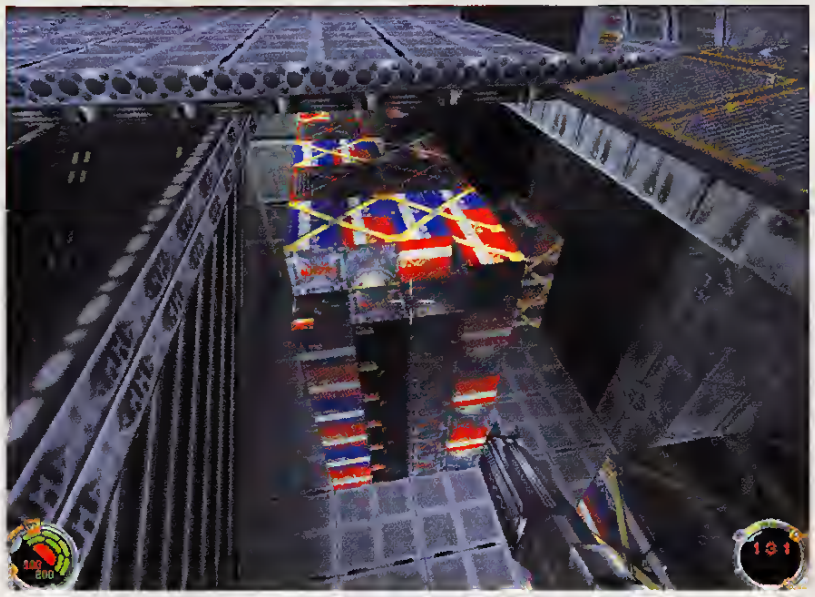
Jedi Knight

Eight Levels of Secrets to Help You Grow in The Force

by Thierry Nguyen

Training to be a Jedi can be hard work. After all, Luke had to lift boulders and confront his past to wield that lightsaber. Fortunately, your training doesn't have to be that grueling. While JEDI KNIGHT doesn't formally acknowledge you as a student of The Force until Level Four, you can start developing your Force skills at the very beginning of the game. Finding all the secrets in every level will earn you a Force star, so you can have a reserve of three Force stars before you earn your lightsaber.

This month, we'll reveal the exact locations of all the secrets on disc one, which will earn you 13 Force stars.



BOXED IN This set of boxes hides the sixth secret area in Level One.

1: Double-Cross on Nar Shaddaa

Secret One: After passing the first fan, you'll be walking down a hallway where you can see a Gran on a ledge to your right. Descend to the ledge, and then jump onto the slanted ramp next to the ledge. You'll then find yourself in a passage that will take you to the top of the fan.

Secret Two: Shortly after another fan, you'll find yourself on a bridge. Swing your head to the right, and you'll see a Gran on a ledge. Jump down to that ledge.

Secret Three: When you're ascending the first 45-degree lift, make a pit stop on the little alcove to the right.

Secret Four: When you reach the bridge that the TIE Bomber flies over, turn around and walk back to the previous bridge. When

3: The Return Home to Sulon

Secret One: The secret is right behind the start location; turn around and shoot the dark wall.

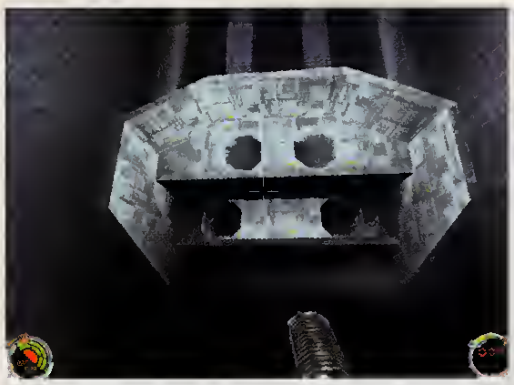
Secret Two: On the hill that is on the left side of the house, there is another weak wall buried in the back. Shoot it.

Secret Three: Follow the plank down where it collapses. When you kill the Tusken Raider, you should be near a weak wall. Shoot it.

Secret Four: When you reach the green area that requires the red key, go to the cave-in where Kyle utters a comment. Shoot the wall on the left.

Secret Five: After opening the red door, make your way to the hall with the Tuskens and the cubbyhole. Go to the second cubbyhole and shoot the oark wall behind it.

Secret Six: When you dive into the waterfall, you can go up a ramp back to where you started. Along this ramp, there is a hidden alcove; use your field light to



START YER ENGINES! In this area, look straight down and search for the tiny ledge beneath you. Drop down to the first secret area of Level Two.

you reach the first bridge, turn right, and you should see four overhangs. Cross them.

Secret Five: When you open the passage to the room filled with cargo boxes, don't go down the ramp just yet. Stay in the room above, and look down onto the boxes. You'll notice that one stack has a space in it; jump down to that one stack and walk along the top to the other side. There, a hole to the secret awaits you.

Secret Six: In the cargo room, before going through the door that leads to the shuttle hangar, turn around and go around the cargo boxes on the left. You should see a ramp that leads up to a small hall that ends at the last secret.

2: The Lost Disk

Secret One: After making your way through the ventilation system, you'll walk down a hall where you can see a ship engine out the window. Walk to the window that gives you a straight view of the engine, then look down. Jump to that tiny little ledge.

Secret Two: After opening the door with the red keycard, you'll enter a room with a couple of boxes and a ramp leading up. Walk up the ramp, but jump onto the red box. From there, jump onto the ledge across from the box.

Secret Three: When navigating the three giant forks, you'll notice a ledge embedded in the side of a wall. That's the third secret.

Secret Four: When you reach another cargo room, scale the set of boxes on the left until you reach the top, then jump to the opposite stack of boxes.

Secret Five: When you reach the room that has the two elevators with the conveyor belt between them, save, because this area is secret-rich. For Secret Five, take the first elevator and make your way to the window ledge on the right, which should lead to the underside of the conveyor belt.

Secret Six: Go up the second elevator, and along the way, jump into the area above the glowing red force field.

Secret Seven: Take the second elevator again, but this time, get off at the ledge just below the elevator's destination; walking along the ledge is the seventh secret.

Secret Eight: Right before you make it to the rendezvous point, follow the ledge along the left wall. Follow this until you can jump to the ramp leading up to the final secret.

help you see inside.

Secret Seven: When you reach the acidic/electric water, jump into the first pool and turn around. Go in the alcove quickly and jump out.

Secret Eight: When you enter the mines, turn on your field light so that you can better see the light in the mines.

4: The Jedi's Lightsaber

Secret One: When you've reached the flowing water, go *against* the current until you reach a grate; cut it open with your lightsaber and pop into the first secret.

Secret Two: Follow the water and get onto the platform suspended above the water. Advance along the right path of the platform. You'll see a hole in the ceiling, which is the actual secret. To get there, you'll need to get a running start (or use Force Speed) and jump across the waterfall into the alcove opposite you.

Secret Three: When going down the water ducts, you'll notice a bit of ground underneath the pipes. Descend down into this area to find the third secret area.

Secret Four: After walking through Secret Three, you'll automatically pop into Secret Four.

Secret Five: When you reach the water duct outside of the purification plant, don't go in it just yet. Jump onto the edge of a duct, get rid of the Tuskens, and you should spot a platform that has a hole in it. Make your way to the hole for this secret.

Secret Six: When you reach the pool with the four water cycs, take the underwater tunnel to the last secret.



WATERBOUND LEAP
In Level Four, jump across the waterfall to enter the alcove on the other side. Inside is a secret area in the ceiling above you.

6: Into the Dark Palace

Secret: There's only one secret here. When you reach the ramps leading down into some water, flip on your field light. Go down into the water, but instead of going straight, take a left turn, going down even further. You'll surface in a room with a hole in the upper corners; going into that hole will net you a rail gun and the sole secret in this level.



7: Yun—The Dark Youth

Since this is a duel, there are no secrets on this level. Good luck taking him down.

8: Palace Escape

Secret One: When the elevator at the beginning goes all the way down, step off and follow the left side of the room. You'll find a little passage on the left for the first secret

Secret Two: When you enter the ventilation shaft, there is a section of cracked floor, between the two entrances. Shoot this cracked floor

Secret Three: In the ventilation shaft, before you reach the grate leading outward, there's a weak wall on the left side. Shoot it

Secret Four: When you reach the first wind tunnel, go in it and allow yourself to be blown upward. You should see a small cubbyhole, which you can enter with a carefully timed jump.

Secret Five: When you use the wind tunnel to propel yourself across a chasm, creep alongside the ledge near your destination. The ledge continues to the other side of the building, where there is a grille on a wall. Chop it down with your lightsaber.

If you've made it this far, you've escaped Jerec's Tower, and can now pursue 8t88 to the Fuel Station. Next month, we'll reveal the secrets in the rest of the levels, and we'll school you in the ways of The Force. You'll need all the help you can get to defeat Jerec and his disciples, whether you lean to the Light Side or the Dark Side of The Force.



THAT ACID SURE STINGS Jump into this acid pool in Level Three, enter this secret area, and then quickly hop out.

5: Baron's Hed: The Fallen City

Secret One: In the center of the pool in the very beginning of the level is the tunnel leading down to this secret.

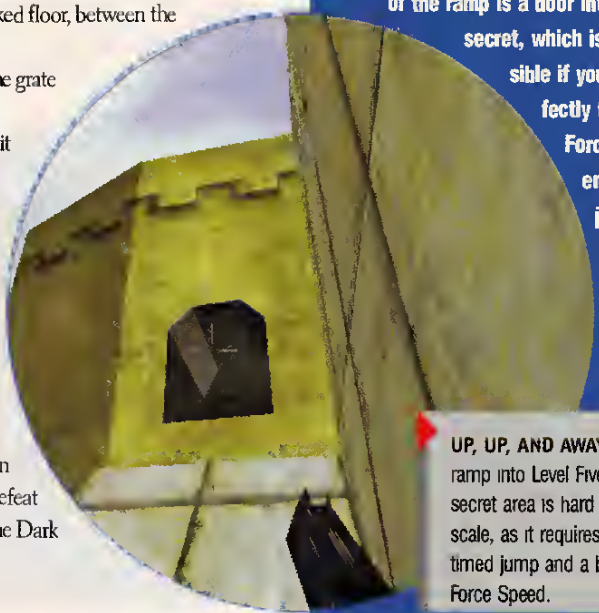
Secret Two: In the first building you enter in the city, take the stairs to the room on the left. Use a thermal detonator on the cracked wall.

Secret Three: A little beyond the first bridge is a building with an awning on the door. Behind the counter is another cracked wall, which you can blow away with a thermal detonator.

Secret Four: In the courtyard, you'll see a board propped up against the door. Move the board out of the way and go into the little alcove.

Secret Five: When you make your way to the top of the main building, go through the window into the bar. Make your way onto the stage, and then use your thermal detonator again on another cracked wall.

Secret Six: After traversing the rooftops to get around the barrier surrounding Jerec's Tower, you'll run into two ramps with a chair on them. On top of the ramp is a door into the secret, which is accessible if you perfectly time a Force-Speed enhanced jump.



UP, UP, AND AWAY This ramp into Level Five's sixth secret area is hard to scale, as it requires a well-timed jump and a bit of Force Speed.

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STRATEGY & TIPS

Fallout

A Quest Guide for the Fearless Mutant Killer

by Petra Schlunk

The good news for gamers is that Interplay's FALLOUT provides a great role-playing experience, with choices and solutions to quests that are consistent with how *you* wish to play. The bad news is that the wide breadth of options makes it impossible for one article to cover all solutions for all the quests. Instead, we'll look at the major quests and some others that often stump players. There are many spoilers; so be careful not to peek unless you really need the help.

Vault 15

Stop in Shady Sands before going here and get some rope from Seth. Use the rope to repair an elevator in the vault. Find more rope in the vault and repair the second elevator. On the last level, go to the southeast corner and discover you can't reach the water chip. *Doh!*

Shady Sands

To eliminate the radscorpions, have Seth take you to their cave. Kill the radscorpions or dynamite the entrance (look for a weakened wall). Later, you may rescue Tandi from some raiders southeast of town by fighting for her, trading for her, or killing the raiders. If you're nice to Ian, he might join you in your quest, giving you some added, welcome firepower.

Junktown

After you help get rid of Killian's would-be assassin, you can help the sheriff get Gizmo. Either plant the bug on Gizmo using the steal skill or wear the wiretap while you agree to kill the sheriff for him. Then return to Killian. To bust the Skulz, the most reliable way (accessible to all characters) is to watch a fight in the Skum Pitt and then talk to the Skulz and steal an urn to join them. After they tell you about their plans to kill Neal, talk to Lars.

The Hub

There are lots of quests in this little town, and most have obvious solutions. Definitely talk to Butch at Far Go Traders and agree to investigate the missing caravans. Then, speak with Rutger and Beth and visit Harold and Slappy in Old Town. Go to the deathclaw cave, kill the deathclaw (this is tough), and get the holodisk from the dying mutant.

Visit the Water Merchants to learn where to find a water chip: Necropolis. While you are here, you can also gain a hundred days for your water-chip quest.



SAY YOUR PRAYERS This computer activates a nuclear warhead to blow up the Cathedral.

Necropolis

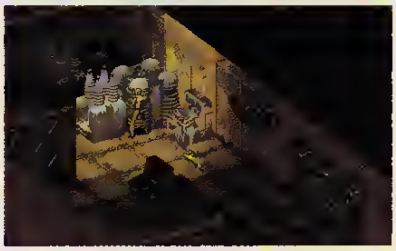
Hop into the sewers and find the underground ghoul leader. Go north and leave the sewers to reach the Water Shed. Reenter the sewers using the manholes on the street to find the missing part (junk) of the water pump. To reach the water pump and the water chip, you'll have to make it past some mutants. You can fool them, fight them, or get past them by other means. Fix the water pump by using the junk on it. Enter the sewers in the same building to find the water chip.

Vault 13

Give the water chip to the Overseer. You'll get your second objective: Get rid of the mutants' source! If you return to the vault before getting the water chip, calm the rebellion by talking with Teresa or by using force at her 5:00 meetings. You can catch a water thief by hanging out in the supply room around midnight.



THAT'S MY MOMMA These stairs lead down to the mother deathclaw in the Boneyard. Kill her



MORE POWER TO YA Fix these generators and use the computer nearby to turn on the main power in the Glow

The Glow

Agree to the Brotherhood's initiate quest. Take three or four Rad-X pills, several RadAways, rope, and a Geiger counter along to the Glow. Stop just before reaching the Glow and pop a couple Rad-X's. Use the rope on a beam by the crater to enter. Don't dawdle; your Rad-X's won't last forever and you can die if you get too radiated. Search the bodies on the first level to find a yellow key and the Brotherhood's holodisk.

Deactivate the elevator traps using color-coded keys you find. On Level Six, repair the generator by the computer and turn on the main power so you can go to Level Five.

Save before leaving. If you are seriously radiated, take some RadAways before leaving. If you get sick, take more and keep going.

Brotherhood

Take the disk from the Glow to the Brotherhood. Perform a quest for Talus or fix some armor in the repair shop to get Power Armor. Talk to General Maxson and the elders to get a quest to scout for a military base.



FREAK SHOW The brains behind the mutants

Military Base

The Military Base is far north and a bit west from the Brotherhood. There are several ways to get past the guards outside. Regardless of your method, you need a holodisk from the guard at the door to enter. To temporarily disrupt the yellow force fields, use explosives or "repair" their emitters. Or, hack into the computer on the east side of the first floor. Use science and then a radio on the computer to create something that will toggle the force fields.

On the third level, kill the prison guard or let him take you to his leader. If you go with him, kill the leader and his friends. Retrieve a decryption holodisk from the leader and a strange-looking key from a locker nearby. On the fourth floor, get past the last force field with explosives or by using Mr. Handy (after fixing him). Save your game. Access the computer and try to hack the security codes. Set the self-destruct for 300 seconds. Run like hell.

Cathedral

If you haven't recruited any Followers, you can sneak around here wearing a purple cloak. Unlock the door to the stairs (Laura can unlock this if you've talked to the Follower's leader).

Go up and kill Morpheus. Get his black key and purple cloak if you don't have one yet. Go downstairs and open the door at the back (use the black key or pick the lock). In the basement, you may find a door you can't open from this side; wait for someone to open it. If you want to meet the Master, first get a psychic nullifier from a prisoner in the northwest of the second level.

On the third floor you have two choices. Go east to meet the Master and then run out of the Cathedral and off the grid before it blows up; or, go west through some locked doors to an elevator leading to a nuclear warhead. Activate the nuke using science or the strange key from the military base. Then beat it out of there.

Once you've killed the Master and destroyed the Military Base, you've completed the game. Sit back and see how well you did saving the world.

The Boneyard

If you take the gunrunners' deathclaw quest, you must kill the mother deathclaw and her eggs; find the entrance to her lair in the northeast corner of the warehouse. To help Miles fix his farm, find the needed part on a body on the east side of the deathclaw area. If you help him, he and Smitty can do wonders with power armor and plasma rifles.

From here, go to either the Military Base or the Cathedral. You must finish both to complete the game.

I Got Skills

It's hard to go wrong creating a character, since Fallout allows for many ways to solve problems. However, the following skills are quite important or useful: small guns (early in the game); energy weapons (for later); lockpick; and, secondarily, speech, science, and repair. You will find several books for improving science and repair, so there is little need to tag these skills.

STRATEGY & TIPS

Abe's Oddysee

An Abbreviated Mudokon's Handbook

by Rusel DeMaria

Taking Abe, the hero of ABE'S ODDYSEE, through his escape and return to Rupture Farms is no easy task. Every few screens you'll encounter a new puzzle or situation, some of which will take as much brain as twitch to solve. You don't have to tackle the tougher ones, but if you want to get the best ending in the game, you'll need to find a lot of the game's trickiest secret areas and save a lot of Mudokons.

SEE THE CGW REVIEW page 146

Escape from Rupture Farms

Before I lead you to the secret areas and captured Mudokons, you need to know how to identify screens in the game. When you press the pause key, you'll see a list of options. At the bottom of the screen is an alphanumeric code (for example, R1P02C03). Breaking this down, we get R1, which is the area of the game you're in, Pxx is the section you're in, and Cxx is the specific screen. I will use these screen designations to identify places in the game throughout the rest of this article.

Finding secret areas is not usually difficult, although a few are very well hidden. Looking behind barrels and under trapdoors is a good bet. In fact, in the very first screen of the game (R1P15C01), there's a secret. Lower Abe behind the barrel to enter it. Here are some basic instructions for completing this first secret area.

R1P15C15: Jump from the ledge to the lower path, then lower yourself to the screen below.

R1P15C16: Sneak to within one step of the edge of the platform you're on. Jump and remain in a hanging position until the Slig walks off his platform, then hoist yourself up. Pull the lever to make the Slig fall into the trapdoor and return to the previous screen.

R1P15C15: Walk under the left-hand saw. Pull the lever to turn off the electricity and return under the saw again. Tell the first Mudokon to follow you. To get him to jump off the ledge, tell him to follow again while standing on the opposite side of the gap. Pull the right-hand lever to change the cycle of the saws and the electrical barriers, and bring the second Mudokon under the first saw. Pull the lever again, and then take him under the second saw and down to the next screen. Follow the Mudokon down.



HEAVE-HO Pulling the lever to the left, in screen R1P15C15, will turn off some of the electricity.

R1P15C16: Chant to free all three Mudokons. Then return to the top and climb to the main path again **(R1P15C01)**.

Now that you've completed the first secret area and saved three Mudokons, you're well on your way. You'll also find secret areas in **R1P15C03**, **R1P15C04**, **R1P15C06**, and **R1P16C03**. To find some areas, you must open a trapdoor and run in while it is still open. There is one last secret area in the first part of the game. To find it, you must make your way onto the Slig's platform in **R1P20C03**.

There are some tricks to completing the secret area in **R1P15C04**. The Security Orb prevents you from chanting, but if you just blow it up you shouldn't have a problem.



BOMBS AWAY Throw a grenade to blow up the Security Orb to get to the secret area in screen R1P15C04.

The Stockyards

Let's move to the next section of the game: the Stockyards. Want to play the game perfectly? Don't miss the hidden Mudokon in **E1P06C01**.

You'll find six secret areas in the



C'MON L'IL FELLA Sneak to the next screen from E1P01C09 with a Mudokon following you

Stockyards. You'll find the first by entering a door in **E1P06C02**.

The keys to secret areas in **E1P01C02** and **E1P01C03** are sneaking and hiding in the shadows.

In **E1P01C05**, there's a secret area. This one is pretty hard, so I'll give you some tips on how to complete it. When you chant and enter the gate, you'll appear in **E1P01C08**.

E1P01C08: As soon as you appear, jump and remain hanging on the ledge ahead. Wait until the bottom Slig has started to walk away, then sneak behind him to the next screen.

E1P01C09: This is tricky. You have to sneak behind the Slig, then, at the last moment, run and jump across the gap. You need to take off in your jump a little early so that you land in a hanging position instead of all the way across. Remain hanging until both Sligs have left the screen. Quickly jump onto the upper path and run to the left. Stop before you enter the next screen and start sneaking.

If your timing is really good, you can say "Hello" to one of the Mudokons and tell him to follow you before moving to the next screen.

E1P01C08: Now sneak to the narrow shadow area and stop there. From here, it's a matter of getting both Mudokons to follow you to the shadow and telling them to wait (when the Slig is gone). Finally, set the bomb when the Slig isn't looking and wait for him to blow up. Then free the two Mudokons and find your way to safety on the lower path without getting blasted by the Slig there. There's no way to finish this area quickly, so you'll have to be patient.

Moving on, you'll arrive at another tricky secret area. This one has two entrances, and for the best results, you'll want to use both of them.

E1P02C01: Climb carefully down the cliff face, avoiding the bats. Drop to the screen below.

E1P02C05: When you land, the sleeping Slig will wake up and walk away. Jump the gap and follow him to the next screen.

Run/jump to the high platform and chant immediately to open the gate. Then, when the Slig goes away again, jump down and through the gate. Possess the Slig in **E1P02C10** and take him down to **E1P02C08**. Make the Slig shout "Look out!" in order to cause the Mudokons to duck, then shoot the Sligs there. Destroy the Slig and climb down to **E1P02C08** and release the two Mudokons. Walk to the left and chant to open the exit gate. Jump through and return to the Stockyards.

But wait! There are two Mudokons still back there. You'll need to go back, but first make your way to **E1P02C03** and get the rocks from the sack on the lower path.

From **E1P02C03**, climb down to **E1P02C02**, chant, and then return to the secret area.

Make your way to the bottom path in **E1P02C08**. Stand about one step to either side of the mine on the upper path and throw a rock, holding the direction key in the opposite direction from the one you're facing. This makes the rock go almost straight up. It will detonate the mine.

Now you can get each of the remaining Mudokons and lead them to the bottom path in **E1P02C08**, where you can set them free. That's it. Return to **E1P02C07** and use the exit gate.

That's all the room we have for ABE'S ODDYSEE tips, but visit our Web site at **www.computergaming.com** for even more cool hints, including more secret area walkthroughs and special control tips.

Rusel DeMaria, CGW's online editor-at-large, is a game designer and strategy book author. He wrote Prima Publishing's Abe's Oddysee: The Official Strategy Guide.





SNEAK AND SNATCH Possess the Slig above in E1P02C10, then take him down to C08. Tell the Mudokons to "Look out!" and fire away.

STRATEGY & TIPS

Age of Empires

Be the First to Enter the Iron Age and Dominate Your Opponents

by Elliott Chin



CLOSER To ensure the fastest resource gathering, build granaries and storage pits near resource deposits to cut down on the distance villagers need to travel to deposit their loads.

AGE OF EMPIRES is a wonderful game that has grabbed us as few games have. Although it certainly has its fair share of problems, there is no denying its addictive and fun gameplay. The game is at its best, though, when you are winning. And winning really isn't that difficult if you follow the strategies in this guide. My strategies definitely aren't the only approaches to victory, but they work convincingly for me when I compete with my fellow editors. There is a lot to cover, so this month, I'll explore how to get started and how to advance to each age as quickly as possible. I'll also provide a few more general tips. Next month, I'll let you in on more military strategies—including how, when, and where to fight—as well as tips on how to protect your Wonder and what to do if your enemy has you on the ropes.

Age Advancement

Once you've specified scenario parameters, it's time to start building an empire. Let's assume you all start in the Stone Age. The key is to advance through the ages as quickly as possible.

Stone Age: First, have one villager build two houses, send the other villagers to find wood and food, and start cranking out half a dozen villagers. You should have a population of 8-10 and have two of them chopping wood and the rest gathering food. Make sure you build your granary next to the berry bushes, and your storage pit next to the trees and stone. It isn't necessary to build a barracks as your first building. It is unlikely that your opponents will be able to mount an offensive this early in the game, and you want to devote your energies to advancing as quickly as possible.

If you are playing on an island map, build a granary and dock first. Build two fishing boats to supplement your work force and start fishing

Pick Your Fights

The first thing to do when playing AGE OF EMPIRES with others is to decide the game parameters. Some gamers like the full tech-tree option because it allows you the breadth of the game's research and building options. However, this option eliminates all racial bonuses, and really takes some of the strategy out of the game.

The next major considerations are the size and land-to-sea ratio of the map. These two factors will define your strategies for the entire game. Choosing either huge or large maps will allow you to build in relative peace, far away from potential enemies, and will offer many resources. Smaller maps will start you closer to your enemies, which translates to more frequent enemy engagements and less plentiful resources. If you like the luxury of building, choose large maps. If you want to eliminate your enemies quickly with military forces, pick a small map.

Island scenarios might seem like a good starting map for beginners, but that isn't the case. It's harder to reach your opponent on an island map, which might seem like a benefit for beginners who want to escape detection. However,



LORD OF THE FARM RING Keep the area around your granary or town center uncluttered so you can build an efficient-as-possible 3x3 farm grid with that building at the center.

By building boats to gather food, you won't have to divert food to build villagers.

If you concentrate on food, you should have the necessary stockpile in under 10 minutes to advance to the Tool Age.

Tool Age: Once in the Tool Age, it's time to beef up your infrastructure. Immediately build a market and a stable. You'll probably need to have two villagers stop foraging and start chopping wood, for a total of four woodcutters. Once the market is finished, have the remaining foragers build farms. You should have 6-9 farms. It's important to not build haphazardly. You need to construct an efficient town that minimizes the distance a villager has to walk from a farm to a granary. Farmers deposit their food in a granary or town center, so ring either building with farms, building them one or two tiles apart from each other and the depository.

During the Tool Age, you want to build two to three more houses and start cranking out a dozen more villagers to start gathering wood, stone, and gold. At this time, food should still be your first priority among resources, with wood, stone, and gold following, respectively. Even as you concentrate on your economy, it's essential now to build scouts and explore the land. Not only do you want to gain the most points for exploration, but you also want to find out where your opponents are and keep tabs on their progress. Scouts also help alert you when an enemy approaches.

At the same time you are scouting, you should be researching walls and towers at the granary. I wouldn't recommend spending food on many troops at this juncture of the game, so towers make the most sense for providing protection for your budding empire. Place towers next to all your resource-rich areas to protect your resources and villagers.

if you are playing with experts, they will find a way onto your island. In contrast, it will be hard for you to mount a sea offense and transport troops to an expert enemy's island, something you may have to do if he builds a Wonder. My advice is to keep things simple for beginners and play with inland maps. Assuming equal skill among all opponents, though, inland maps are best for those players who want to attack early.

Lastly, know your opponent and adjust your strategies accordingly. If you know that your human opponents like to play defensively and build huge economies, attack them early and cripple their empire during the Bronze or Tool Age. This will surprise and thwart them. If they play offensively, and attack early, then you will have to build towers early and keep a few infantry handy even during the Tool Age.

Top 10 Tips

1 Food is vital to advancing through the ages, so make it your economic priority. In the Stone Age, 75 percent of your villagers should gather food while the rest gather wood. In subsequent ages, make sure you have at least six farms (nine is optimal).

2 Build scouts or scoutships early, as soon as you advance to the Tool Age. You want to explore the map, not only for points, but also to find out where your opponents are.

3 Upgrade your units as soon as possible, but not at the expense of age advancement. Usually it's best to upgrade weapons and armor for only your most plentiful unit type, saving the rest of the food for advancement. Once you hit the Bronze Age, you can start to upgrade your units more frequently.

4 Engage your opponents early. Do not create a big army and attack. Instead, create small skirmish forces of three to four units (preferably swift cavalry), and harass enemy camps on a regular basis. You'll not only increase your points by racking up kills, you'll also gauge your opponent's military strength, set him back a little in production by killing his villagers, and force him to divert resources and villagers away from age advancement to military defense.

5 If you choose not to attack early, at least maintain adequate defenses so that *you* don't get overrun. Build towers to protect your vital resource areas, and wall off your settlement. Begin these defensive maneuvers as early as the Tool Age. As with all things, you need to exercise discretion so you don't divert too many farmers to stone mining.

6 Check the achievement tab frequently to see the breakdown of your opponents' scores and to see where you need to improve your points. If you find yourself losing points in economy because

your enemy has the villager high bonus, you can just create enough villagers to steal the bonus away. Or, if your opponent has the exploration bonus, you can see just how much more of the map you need to explore to take away that bonus as well. Not only will you increase your points, but you'll also gain a stronger work force and more intelligence, respectively. Checking the achievements tab and compensating for your point deficiencies will help you and hurt the game's current leader.

7. Take advantage of the user controls. Assuming that you have smart opponents, speed becomes the deciding factor in determining who wins the game and who loses. Use waypoints and assign numbers to your troops for better coordination, and use the hot-keys to jump to buildings and create units.

8. Don't clump all your buildings together, and separate buildings by type. It's best to have the military buildings on the outskirts of your town, and build your farms and granary away from the barracks. Houses should be buried in the back of your town, away from where enemies would approach. Leave at least one- or two-space paths between buildings so villagers won't get caught walking between buildings.

9. When you build structures, assign additional villagers to the task to speed up the construction. Two villagers will build twice as fast, three will build three times as fast, and so on.

10. Three words: Food, food, food.



INTO THE UNKNOWN Knowledge is power, so scout early to explore the map and find your opponents, and check the achievements to keep tabs on them.



HARASS 'EM Even though it will slow your advancement schedule, you should harass your enemies during the Bronze Age to stunt their progress

It might seem difficult to conduct all these actions at the same time, but during lulls in the game, such as when you are waiting for villagers to finish building towers, you can upgrade your weapons at the storage pit and your villagers at the market. Don't get too upgrade-happy because you don't want to drain your food surplus too much and delay advancement to the Bronze Age. I recommend researching woodworking for better wood-gathering, tool-working, and armor for your scouts.

During the Tool Age, you simply want to amass enough food to advance yet another age. For both ages, your strategy should still be very food-oriented, meaning that you must concentrate on stockpiling food for eventual advancement to the Bronze Age.

Bronze Age: Once you hit the Bronze Age, you shouldn't relax your pace of farming, but you should balance your focus.

During the Bronze Age, if you haven't adjusted your work force, you should have about 20 villagers, with nine farming, and the rest split evenly among gathering gold, wood, and stone. You might want to build a few more villagers and apply them to goldmining so you can advance to the Iron Age quickly.

Build a minimum of buildings again, so you don't have to divert villagers away from food and gold gathering to cut wood. I recommend building the Government Center and either a Temple or an Academy.



OUR EMPIRE'S MONUMENT On huge and large maps it's easiest to win with a Wonder. Assign your entire workforce to the effort and you'll have it built quickly

During this age, it's important to begin upgrading more frequently, starting with Market upgrades, like gold mining, stone mining, domestication, plow, wheel, and artisanship. You also want to upgrade your units at the Storage Pit in anticipation of either offensive maneuvers or defensive commitments.

During this age, different players will begin to manifest different strategies. Defensive players will now want to wall off their entire empire and crank out villagers to maximize resource gathering for the Iron Age and eventual Wonder building. Offensive players will shift their focus to the military and start building troops to harass the enemy.

If you choose to remain defensive and continue on the economic route, you will advance quickly, but you can bet your enemies will also be entering the Bronze or Iron Age soon. My strategy, rather than allowing my enemies to match my pace, is to go on the offensive and harass them to slow their progress, while beefing up my villager production to compensate for the war effort. If you embark on the harassment strategy, you obviously won't advance as swiftly as you would have if you remained isolated. However, the trade-off is worth it, since you will set your opponent back.

Whatever your focus, though, don't lose sight of the Iron Age. Whoever advances first to this last age will maintain the advantage.

Iron Age: Finally, you've reached the pinnacle of civilization. Don't let up. If you don't have 12 houses by now, make sure you build them. Then, make sure you have a villager population approaching 30. You can now relax your food production and apply your villagers as needed.

Build the rest of the Bronze and Iron Age buildings, and spread your villagers evenly among wood, stone, food, and gold. If you want to build a Wonder, divert half your farmers and add them evenly to the work forces gathering wood, stone, and gold. Once you start building your Wonder, devote your entire work force to the effort. It will significantly speed up the process.

If you choose a military route to victory, delete whatever villagers you need to make room for troops.

Whether you attempt to achieve victory militarily or economically, your previous efforts will be the key. Always maintain the strongest infrastructure possible, and victory will follow.



ALL MINE During the Tool Age, start building walls and towers to protect valuable gold mines and stone quarries.

Understanding Villagers

Ensemble provided us with two tables that show how fast villagers will work at their given tasks, as well as how technological discoveries will modify their work rate.

Villager Base Work Rate

This table shows how many resource units a villager gathers per second, as well as the base carry capacity without any upgrades.

Unit	Work Rate	Base Carry Capacity
Farmer	0.40	10
Fisherman	0.80	10
Fishing Boat	0.40	15
Forager	0.45	10
Gold Miner	0.45	10
Hunter	0.45	10
Lumberjack	0.55	10
Stone Miner	0.45	10

Discovery Modifiers

Modifier	Effect
Artisan	+2 to lumberjack carry capacity, +0.20 to lumberjack work rate
Babylonian Civ.	+3 to stone miner carry capacity, +0.30 to stone miner work rate
Coinage	+0.25 gold to all gold gathered (i.e. gathering 10 gold would "create" 12.5 gold)
Craftsmanship	+2 to lumberjack carry capacity, +0.20 to lumberjack work rate
Egyptian Civ.	+2 to gold miner carry capacity, +0.20 to gold miner work rate
Fishing Ship Upgrade	+5 to fishing boat carry capacity
Gold Mining	+3 to gold miner carry capacity, +0.30 to gold miner work rate
Jihad	-8.0 to all villager carrying capacities
Persian Civ.	+3 to hunter carry capacity, +0.30 to hunter work rate
Phoenician Civ.	+3 to lumberjack carry capacity, +0.30 to lumberjack work rate
Siegecraft	+3 to stone miner carry capacity, +0.30 to stone miner work rate
Stone Mining	+3 to stone miner carry capacity, +0.30 to stone miner work rate
Woodworking	+2 to lumberjack carry capacity, +0.20 to lumberjack work rate

STRATEGY & TIPS

Total Annihilation

A Guide to Full Metal Mayhem

by Martin E. Cirulis

It's been a long time since any wargame—turn-based *or* real-time—has offered the tactical and strategic choices that confront you during an average game of TOTAL ANNIHILATION. There are dozens of units and defensive installations from which to choose, and each of them has its own strengths and weaknesses.

I could fill half of this magazine with tactical analysis of the ground vehicles alone. Instead, I'll concentrate on some helpful initial tricks and tactics, along with some of the best and worst building choices available.

While it still takes a lot of practice to make you a master of TOTAL ANNIHILATION, the advice and observations presented here should give you an advantage, not only in the single-player campaigns, but also in Net games with your fellow gamers.

Since the CORE and ARM have an abundance of analogous units with similar, if not identical, firepower, most references here are to types of vehicles (for instance, amphibious tank means both the ARM Triton and the CORE Crock).



TWO UNITS ARE BETTER THAN ONE Two construction units can combine their efforts to build faster, a crucial tactic when setting up your base.

Success Begins at Home

As with most real-time games, it's hard to carve a victory out of the chaos of TOTAL ANNIHILATION if you don't spend some time and thought building the near-perfect base. Your initial concerns should almost always be resources and defense.

Build two or three solar plants, followed by mines on any metal site within safe reach. While the temptation to wander far afield scouting for

The Losers

TOTAL ANNIHILATION provides many excellent units, and by the time you read this, the kids at Cavedog may have whipped up a few new winners. Not every idea, though, works out in the game as well as it does on paper. We've taken the liberty of pointing out some of the less feasible units in the game, so you won't have to waste precious time and resources finding out the hard way.

Crawling Bombs: These turkeys are more dangerous to you than to your opponent. Dreadfully slow and easily killed, they haven't a hope in Hades of catching an opponent unawares. There's a small chance you could sneak a few under the cover of a radar jammer when an opponent is busy fighting on another front, but the odds are against it.

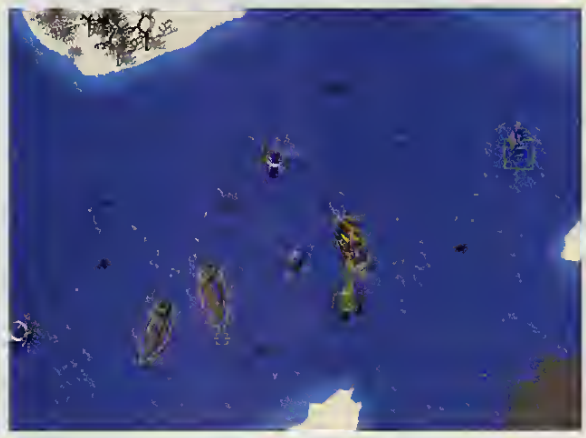
Amphibious Tanks: This idea looks great on paper, but once again, slow and plodding is a

more metal may be strong, try and avoid it until your defenses have been built up, as nothing attracts unwanted enemy attention like a premature scouting mission. Since energy is so vital in the production of the strongest units and fortifications, you might want to consider building an energy storage bin alongside your initial solar collectors, in order to save up as much of that early energy surplus as possible. Once you have a trickle of power and metal coming in, you can throw up your first factory. Producing either Kbots or vehicles is good, although the Kbot factory wins out if you expect air patrols fairly soon or if the terrain makes ground vehicles slow, easy targets.

Your initial defensive setup depends on whether you are fighting the computer or your fellow bloodthirsty humans. In games versus the computer, the early danger is almost always from aircraft, so quickly get that initial Kbot factory built and start pumping out those light antiaircraft mechs. Don't bother with the slow-turning laser towers unless you have good reason to believe you will have enemy ground forces in to lunch—the light laser towers are too ineffectual against fast scout or fighter aircraft to warrant early deployment. On the other hand, the greatest danger from human opponents is a quick bum rush, usually of light Kbots. In this instance, one or two light laser towers can be a lifesaver, so throw them up as soon as your initial power and metal production is established. In sea games, any static defense should be close to the shoreline. This will serve as a last-ditch punch, should your sea-based defenses go down.



HIGH GROUND With TOTAL ANNIHILATION's enhanced terrain realism, it is essential to capture the high ground and fortify your position there



THE HIGH SEAS For naval defenses, keep your towers close to shore in case the enemy gets through your shore defense vessels.

While I realize that space in which to build is at a premium on most maps, try to avoid the temptation to place your power production (or mines on CORE prime maps) in nice tight bunches, as those make delightful targets for bombers. Try to arrange your structures in a loose jumble that not only allows for easy passage of combat units, but also makes those long bomber runs as non-optimal as possible.

One final construction tip is to make sure you have multiple radars up and running (with overlapping fields). The worst thing that can happen is to be blinded by a surgical air strike right before a big enemy rush. By the time you put up another tower it could be all over.

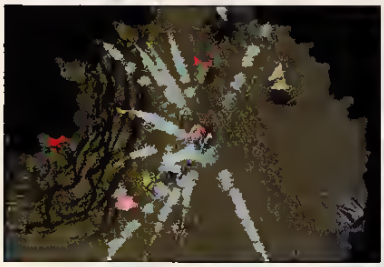
One if by Land

Land warfare in TOTAL ANNIHILATION is fast and bloody, and victory usually goes to he who applies the most concentrated firepower while making his own units difficult targets. As you play this game, the use of mobile artillery and screens of heavy units becomes obvious (the CORE Can is the best screening unit money and metal can buy), but one lesson you need to learn early is to seize the high ground—and know what to do with it once you have it.

As in real life, most battles for high ground, no matter how fierce, are worth the price. This is true whether you really need the base, or if the battle is simply serving to tie down enemy forces while you get to work someplace else. If you do manage to seize the hill, your first task is to fortify it. If you have the time to keep a close eye on things, send in your Commander (he is very vulnerable on hilltops, so if he starts to take fire, immediately yank him down the safe side of the hill) to put up the first

recipe for disaster in this game. The reality is that these units are underwater sitting ducks for any enemy with torpedo or depth charge capability. One sub or torpedo launcher can destroy a half-dozen amphibious tanks as they crawl by. Use only if you have complete sea superiority and your opponent's air defenses are just too strong for you to obliterate him the easy way.

Aircraft Carriers: These monstrosities are a floating metal-donation waiting to be delivered to your opponent. Since aircraft have unlimited range, and can patrol open ocean indefinitely, there is little reason to provide them with a large, undergunned, and vulnerable platform from which to operate. The aircraft repair ability is nice, but in contested airspace, your jets will usually be blasted to bits the moment they slow down to land. Build them only if you really, really need the supplemental radar and power abilities, and then keep them surrounded by subs.



AMBUSH Hiding a gun tower against the back of a hillside protects it from air attack and allows you to ambush enemy units.

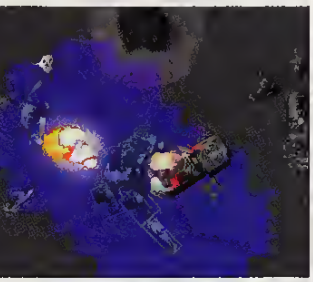
light laser towers. As you do this, make sure to anchor either side of the hill with a piece or two of heavy armor and an artillery piece. Once you finish your initial fortifications, bring up a construction Kbot to put up a missile tower or two and a heavy laser tower to spit death on approaching bombers and ground units. At the same time, you should be building a heavy plasma emplacement well behind the hill to rain down deadly fire on the other side (without clipping the top of the hill). Test this using mobile artillery first.

A wise commander will use his transport aircraft to bring construction vehicles and artillery up on unassailable mesas. The sharp cliffs mean you won't be able to fire on nearby units, but high towers make for great long-range bombardment and deadly air defense.

Two if by Sea

TOTAL ANNIHILATION was careful to make naval conflict almost as difficult and expensive as it is in real life. With the exception of scout ships (you should always have at least a half-dozen of these on hand for antiaircraft and harassment purposes), the metal and energy cost of even mediocre naval units means a haphazard commitment of forces is fatal unless you have an absolutely incredible infrastructure.

The submarine is your best friend—and greatest enemy. Build subs in droves until you have achieved sea superiority, and only then start to worry about bombardment monsters like cruisers and battleships. To be honest, the Level 2 subs are not that much of an improvement, given their cost. When in doubt, stick to the initial Lurker and Snake units. If you have long-range radar, missile ships come to the forefront as an excellent long-range bombardment platform. Just make sure to guard them well behind a sub screen and a couple of patrolling fighters. While computer opponents may shrug off an occasional missile fall, human opponents tend to get annoyed and look to sink the offender immediately with subs and bombers.



SUBMERGED An unprotected capital ship is just dog meat to a sub wolf pack.

Don't neglect your sonar buoys. They are crucial in screening enemy subs before they get close enough to your capital ships and construction yards to do damage.



HAMMER TIME If you can handle control of multiple air-strike forces and coordinate a simultaneous attack, you can claim a swift victory.

And Just Panic if by Air

In this game, a well-coordinated air strike, especially early on, can win the war all by itself. While most opponents will be wise enough to set up fierce defenses consisting of missile/laser towers, AA Bots, missile tanks, and fighter CAP (especially CORE players, whose fighters have the edge in maneuverability), if you have the time, you can construct an airborne hammer and anvil that can crush even the best base.

You prepare the hammer by first building your sacrificial distraction flight of recon aircraft. Fly your bombers out in groups of two or three to safe spots away from the enemy base, far enough away from each other to create several attack vectors when they come in. Send up your fighters to orbit just outside enemy AA range to try to draw off enemy CAP before the attack. The tricky part is keeping all of these groups on separate Ctrl keys, so you can take control and redirect them quickly. This will be the anvil.

The hammer is composed of four to six gunships, all waiting on the deck for the attack to begin. When your initial bomber rush—with fighter cover and decoy screen of recon planes—begins its first pass, take control of your gunships and hit the enemy base hard and fast. Hose down every defense tower in sight, one after another, with the gunships' incredible firepower. With a lot of skill and a bit of luck, you can ravage the enemy base defenses before your bombers come back for a second pass. Once the big guns are down, use your remaining gunships to destroy anything under construction before moving onto the construction facilities themselves. Even if your big air strike is eventually destroyed, the damage it does will leave things wide open for your ground units—which are now rushing forward, because you are a tactical genius.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

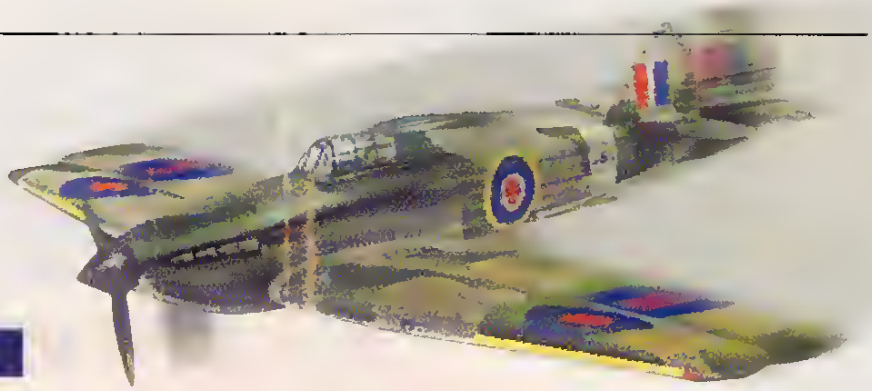
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CGTIPS!



Strategy/Wargames

Achtung Spitfire

An aircraft's ability to turn is closely related to its airspeed. Fly too fast or too slow, and turn rate suffers. Unfortunately, the "snap turn" statistics shown in the Achtung Spitfire aircraft database give no indication of this relationship between speed and turn performance.



Even the early-model Spitfires could turn on an aerial dime.

Knowing a plane's corner speed, the speed at which its turn rate is maximized, is much more useful in a dogfight. The following table lists the corner speeds for all fighters included in the game. Where two numbers are shown, the first is the lowest speed at which the plane can pull 6g's, and the second is the minimum speed for 8g's. "Max" means corner speed is higher than the plane's maximum level-speed at the given altitude.

It is usually wise to stay near corner speed in a turning fight, but be aware that not one of these planes is powerful enough to maintain a maximum rate turn in level flight without decelerating. Unless your plane is blessed with a high thrust-to-weight ratio coupled with a low "sustained turn drag" rating, save that high-g potential for when you really need it. — *Robin Kim*

Optimal Cornering Speeds for Various Planes

Airplane Model	Corner Speed @ 5,000 ft. (mph)	Corner Speed @ 15,000 ft. (mph)	Corner Speed @ 25,000 ft. (mph)
Spitfire I, II, or V	200/250	250	300/Max
Spitfire IX	200	250	300/350
Typhoon	300/350	350/Max	Max
Hurricane I	200/250	250	300/Max
Hurricane II A or B	200	250	Max
Hurricane II C	250	Max	Max
Defiant	250	300/Max	Max
Whirlwind	250	300/Max	Max
Gladiator	150/200	200	200/Max
Fw 190	Max	Max	Max
Bf 109E	250	300/350	Max
Bf 109F	250	300/350	Max
Bf 109G	300/Max	350/Max	Max
Bf 110	250	300/Max	Max
MB 152	250	300/Max	Max
D 520	200	250	300/Max
Hawk 75	200/250	250	Max
MS 406	200/250	250	Max
Potez	200/Max	250	Max

Civil War Generals

Oddly enough for a Civil War game, movement and stacking rules force most movement to be in column. The game's lack of skirmishers makes a column formation even more vulnerable than usual. When your forces are defending, you can capitalize on this weakness by forcing enemy columns and artillery batteries to deploy earlier than they would like. Here, a single Confederate regiment has caused most of the Union attack column at Blackburn's Ford to deploy several hundred yards away from the crucial edge of a rise.

Artillery can't change formation and move on the same turn, so this Confederate unit can move quickly to safety. Meanwhile, the main Rebel body has time to prepare a warm reception for the Yanks, once the enemy troops finally move up to the rise.



Action

Atomic Bomberman



OFFENSIVE TIPS

1. Greed kills. Watch for opponents going for power-ups in short halls with one way in and no corners to hide behind. When an enemy goes for the power-up, seal him in with a single bomb.

2. When an opponent stops to wait for a bomb to go off, he may be vulnerable. Gauge how much time remains before the bomb explodes, and act as though you are trying to get out of the bomb's path by turning toward your opponent (who has stopped moving). Then surround him with bombs before he realizes that you are attacking and not hiding.

3. Got lots of flame enhancements? Players on one side of the screen may not pay any mind to bombs dropped on the other side, and may risk moving in the bombs' path. Works great with the orange flame power-up.

4. Jelly bombs make everyone nervous. No one knows exactly when, or, more importantly, *where* they are going to blow.

5. The timer is the best power-up in the game. Not just because you can set it off when people walk past it, but also because you can use it to set off other players' bombs before they are safely out of the way. Note this example: Two players are at a standoff and repeatedly run up to each other, drop a bomb, and then hide around a corner. If one has a timer, he can set his bomb off the second he is out of the way, setting the other player's bomb off early. When used with the kick, this works even better. Finally, when used with the boxing glove or the blue hand, the timer can set off a bomb where everyone least expects it.

DEFENSIVE TIPS

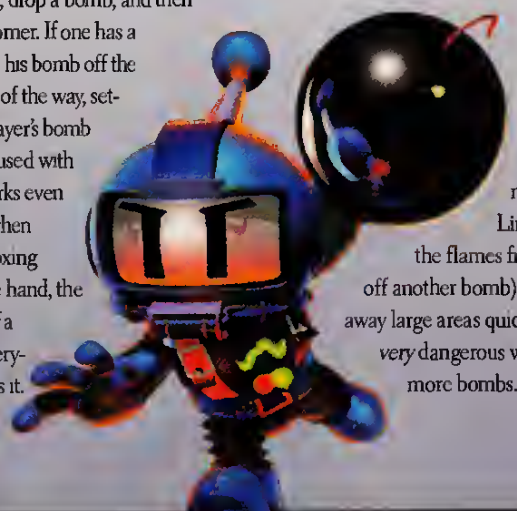
1. Even if you are in a direct line from a bomb and have no way out, still run as far away as possible; you never know exactly how far the bomb's reach will be.

2. When you're sealed in by multiple bombs on two or more sides, move next to the one dropped last. If the bombs aren't connected—and you hide from the blast of the first one—you may be able to get out of the way of the second by escaping down the path previously blocked by the first.

3. See a power-up you want? If it is in an easily sealed area, put a bomb in a place that will block off the area from other players, but won't seal you in at the same time. Then pick up the power-up and wait for your own bomb to go off.

4. Plenty of obstacles between you and the nearest opponent? Sometimes you're better off blowing away your side of the screen (looking for power-ups) than charging straight for the nearest enemy.

5. Just starting out? Always look for the spot where your bombs can hit the most blocks. Linking bombs (so the flames from one bomb set off another bomb) also helps clear away large areas quickly—this is *very* dangerous with four or more bombs.



Simulations/Space

iF-16

▸A target for a laser-guided weapon can be selected either directly, with LANTIRN, or indirectly, by using the F-16's ground radar modes. Because it presents more information, radar is invariably faster and easier to use. The biggest problem with using radar is that if the target moves off the radar scope, the weapon, which requires target illumination all the way till impact, will lose lock. The best solution is to first designate the desired target on radar, then bring up the LANTIRN FLIR MFD mode and deactivate your radar. With radar on standby, LANTIRN's laser designator will remain trained on the correct target—even after you have overflown it.

▸Cluster bombs are excellent weapons for dealing with groups of ground vehicles, but only when used correctly. Your goal should



be to generate a broad pattern of bomblets that is dense enough to kill almost everything within the target area. First, don't fly too fast (350–400 knots is about right) or the pattern will be too long, producing many gaps in the coverage. Second, don't trust the bombing system—it will almost always tell you to drop too early, resulting in the bomblet storm either barely reaching or even falling short of the aim point. Practice until you learn how much lead-time is necessary.

▸Gun kills in iF-16 are surprisingly easy once you learn to trust the EEGS funnel. Put a fighter-sized target near the small end in a stable turn for just a second, then hold down the trigger as you pull the bandit through the bottom of the funnel—BOOM! It works every time, even well outside the gun's nominal range limit. —*Denny Atkin*

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ALONE IN THE DARK (I-Motion, 1992)
Lovecraftian horror goes 3D, with shifting camera angles adding to the creepy atmosphere

BATTLE CHESS (Interplay, 1988)
The Franklin Mint of computer chess games with violent and funny animation disguising a solid chess engine.

BETRAYAL AT KRONDOR (Dynamix, 1993)
As rich and imaginative as Raymond Feist's world itself, its 3D perspective was fresh

CHESSMASTER (Software Toolworks, 1986)
The Cadillac of castling, this chess masterpiece gets better with each version

DUNGEON MASTER (FTL Software, 1987)
Trend setting graphics, digitized stereo, and great hack and slash from a decade ago



DAY OF THE TENTACLE (LucasArts, 1993)
Offbeat sequel to MANIAC MANSION, the interactive equivalent of a classic Chuck Jones cartoon

DOOM (id Software, 1993) Revolutionized PC action games and network gaming, surpassed in technology but not gameplay

EARL WEAVER BASEBALL (EA, 1986)
Revolutionary physics-based baseball game that pleased both action and statistics fans.

EMPIRE (Interstel, 1978)
WWII in space, this mainframe transplant brought elegant mechanics, depth, and unending replayability to the PC

F-19 STEALTH FIGHTER (MicroProse, 1988)
A "thinking man's" sim, with great missions, in which sneaking around is as fun as dogfighting

FALCON 3.0 (Spectrum HoloByte, 1991)
Tough, detailed jet sim with ambitious AI, graphics, and connectivity to match its realism

FRONT PAGE SPORTS FOOTBALL PRO (Dynamix, 1993)
Physics-based system, good AI, and unmatched career play make this the ultimate in pigskin play

GETTYSBURG: THE TURNING POINT (SSI, 1986)
First variable order of battle changed the look of all American Civil War games on the PC

GUNSHIP (MICROPROSE, 1989)
Great character continuity, R&R for fatigued pilots, and even sick leave, best chopper fare until Jane's LONGBOW



HARPOON (360 Pacific, 1989)
In depth modern naval battles in real time, based on Cold War fears

KAMPFGRUPPE (SSI, 1985)
Armored warfare on WWII's Eastern Front, offered engaging battles on multiple platforms

KING'S QUEST V (Sierra On-Line, 1990)
Redefined the graphic adventure with non-text based parser and VGA graphics

LEMMINGS (Psygnosis, 1991)
The lovable cartoon Lilliputians were real-time hits on every platform

LINKS 386 PRO (Access Software, 1992)
Topped the leader board in graphics and realism for its era

M-1 TANK PLATOON (MicroProse, 1989)
Realistic sim that properly focused on armored formations rather than single vehicles, good mission designs

MASTER OF MAGIC (MICROPROSE, 1994)
The atmosphere and variety of MAGIC: THE GATHERING with the sophistication of CIVILIZATION

MASTER OF ORION (MicroProse, 1993)
Remarkable diplomatic AI, deep and varied technology tree, aliens required radically different playing styles

MECH BRIGADE (SSI, 1985)
Modern armored battles with improved KAMPFGRUPPE system and more realism



MIGHT & MAGIC (New World Computing, 1986)
First-person, maze-based RPG with huge environment and tough tactical combat

M.U.L.E. (EA, 1983)
A landmark multiplayer strategy game that had no weapons of destruction, just cutthroat competition that made economics fun

PANZER GENERAL (SSI, 1994)
A truly fun wargame with an elegant interface, great campaigns, strong AI, good graphics, and impressive sound

RED BARON (Dynamix, 1990)
WWI air combat with great graphics, incredible realism, and a versatile replay feature

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION (MicroProse, 1991)
CGW's #1 rated game of all time, indescribably addictive world conquest/exploration game.



SID MEIER'S PIRATES (MicroProse, 1987)
Combines pirate adventure, action, RPG, and strategy to make the most successful hybrid of all time.

SID MEIER'S RAILROAD TYCOON (MicroProse, 1990)
SimCity meets 1830 with robber barons for emphasis

SIMCITY (Maxis, 1987)
Urban planning with fascinating consequences and challenges, the first great software toy

STARFLIGHT (EA, 1986)
Depth, great characters, and a good sci-fi storyline set early standards for RPGs



THE BARD'S TALE (EA, 1985)
Pioneered three point animation, 3D color mazes, and automapping

THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND (LucasArts, 1990)
Comedy adventure that set new standards in writing quality and social sensitivity

THEIR FINEST HOUR (LucasArts, 1989)
WWII sim with great campaigns and crew member options some current sims lack

TIE FIGHTER (LucasArts, 1994)
Most satisfying *Star Wars* space combat game to date lets you live on the dark side

ULTIMA III (Origin Systems, 1983)
Coherency and surprising subtlety emphasized role playing, and set the tone for later ULTIMAS.

ULTIMA IV (Origin Systems, 1985)
High concept RPG explored meaning of virtue and put the ROLE in role playing.

ULTIMA VI (Origin Systems, 1990)
This RPG as morality play paved way for ULTIMA ONLINE'S realistic environs and objects.

ULTIMA UNDERWORLD (Origin Systems, 1992)
The first truly 3D RPG, and still the most convincing, its dungeon walls were nicely "painted" with texture-mapped graphics.

WAR IN RUSSIA (SSI, 1984)
More realistic than EASTERN FRONT, it captured the essence of the largest land campaign in history

WASTELAND (Interplay, 1986)
Derived from Mike Stackpole's *Mercenaries, Spies, and Private Eyes*, this is the definitive postapocalyptic RPG



WING COMMANDER I (Origin Systems, 1990)
A hot spaceflight engine, untolding story path, and great characters.

WING COMMANDER II (Origin Systems, 1991)
Darker story, grittier feel, sound card advances, and tougher AI made this a sequel of sequels

WING COMMANDER III (Origin Systems, 1994)
Surprisingly satisfying FMV space opera didn't lose the essence of the space combat game.

WIZARDRY (Sir-Tech Software, 1981)
Defined the computer RPG with maze-based viewpoint and atmospheric spell names.

WOLFENSTEIN 3-D (id Software, 1992)
Smooth scrolling action blastfest cleverly updated the original, and put shareware back on the map

X-COM (MicroProse, 1994)
Premier tactical squad level engine combined with alien tech research and pop culture for a sci-fi game nearly as addictive as Civ

ZORK (Infocom, 1981)
The progenitor of adventure games on the PC, its humor and challenging puzzles seem timeless

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TOP ACTION GAMES

	GAME	COMPANY	SCORE
1	Quake Pack 2: Dissolution of Eternity	id Software/Rogue	9.01
2	Quake Pack 1: Scourge of Armagon	id Software/Ritual	8.98
3	Duke Nukem 3D	3D Realms	8.28
4	Tomb Raider	Eidos	8.25
5	Crusader: No Remorse	EA/Origin	8.07
6	Quake	id Software	8.02
7	The Need for Speed SE	EA	7.97
8	Crusader: No Regret	EA/Origin	7.75
9	Moto Racer	EA	7.65
10	MDK	Playmates/Shiny	7.54



TOP ADVENTURE GAMES

	GAME	COMPANY	SCORE
1	Gabriel Knight 2	Sierra	8.21
2	The Pandora Directive	Access	8.19
3	Twinsen's Odyssey	Activision	7.87
4	Sema	Sierra	7.79
5	The Neverhood	DreamWorks	7.69
6	Seeime of the Hooting	Interplay	7.62
7	Spycroft	Activision	7.47
8	Circle of Blood	Virgin	7.46
9	Full Throttle	LucasArts	7.42
10	Leisure Suit Larry 7	Sierra	7.32



TOP CLASSIC/PUZZLE GAMES

	GAME	COMPANY	SCORE
1	You Don't Know Jack II	Berkeley Systems	8.54
2	You Don't Know Jack	Berkeley Systems	8.21
3	You Don't Know Jack Movies	Berkeley Systems	7.96
4	You Don't Know Jack Sports	Berkeley Systems	7.72
5	Power Chess	Sierra	7.32
6	Incredible Toons	Sierra	7.21
7	Monopoly	Virgin/Westwood	6.84
8	Sierra Poker	Sierra	6.77
9	Mind Grind	Microforum	6.73
10	Baku Baku	Sega	5.94



TOP SIMULATION/SPACE COMBAT GAMES

	GAME	COMPANY	SCORE
1	Wing Commander IV	EA/Origin	8.31
2	AH-64 Longbow	EA/Origin	8.12
3	MechWarrior 2	Activision	8.06
4	MechWarrior 2: Mercenaries	Activision	8.04
5	Silent Hunter	SSI	7.85
6	U.S. Navies Fighters	EA	7.82
7	EF2000	Ocean	7.62
8	U.S. Navy Fighters	EA	7.53
9	Advanced Tactical Fighters	EA	7.42
10	X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter	LucasArts	7.39



TOP SPORTS GAMES

	GAME	COMPANY	SCORE
1	Links LS	Access	8.66
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5	NBA Live 97	EA Sports	7.95
6	Jack Nicklaus 4	Accolade	7.80
7	Triplepley 98	EA Sports	7.75
8	NASCAR Racing	Sierra	7.57
9	NHL Hockey 96	EA Sports	7.47
	Triplepley 97	EA Sports	7.47



TOP STRATEGY GAMES

	GAME	COMPANY	SCORE
1	Heroes II: Price of Loyalty	New World Computing	9.10
2	WarCraft II Expansion Disk	Blizzard	8.85
3	WarCraft II	Blizzard	8.75
4	Red Alert	Virgin/Westwood	8.74
5	Heroes II	New World Computing	8.73
6	Civilization II	MicroProse	8.71
7	Red Alert: Counterstrike	Virgin/Westwood	8.38
8	Command & Conquer	Virgin/Westwood	8.24
9	C&C: Covert Operations	Virgin/Westwood	8.23
10	Civilization II: Scenarios	MicroProse	8.18



TOP ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

	GAME	COMPANY	SCORE
1	Diablo	Blizzard	8.70
2	Daggerfall	Bethesda	7.38
3	Anvil of Dawn	New World Computing	7.12
4	Albion	Blue Byte	6.10
5	—		
6	—		
7	—		
8	—		
9	—		
10	—		



TOP WARGAMES

	GAME	COMPANY	SCORE
1	Steel Panthers II Campaign Disk	SSI	8.80
2	Steel Panthers Campaign Disk	SSI	8.68
3	Steel Panthers II	SSI	8.38
4	Steel Panthers	SSI	8.37
5	Battleground: Shiloh	TalonSoft	8.13
6	Battleground: Bull Run	TalonSoft	8.12
7	Battleground: Napoleon in Russia	TalonSoft	8.06
8	Tigers on the Prowl II	HPS	8.02
9	Battleground: Antietam	TalonSoft	7.98
10	Battleground: Waterloo	TalonSoft	7.73

	GAME	COMPANY	TYPE	SCORE
★	1 Heroes II: Price of Loyalty	New World Comp.	ST	9.10
★	2 Quake Pack 2: Dissolution of Eternity	id Software/Rogue	AC	9.01
	3 Quake Pack 1: Scourge of Armagon	id Software/Ritual	AC	8.98
	4 WarCraft II Expansion Disk	Blizzard	ST	8.85
★	5 Steel Panthers II Campaign Disk	SSI	WG	8.80
	6 WarCraft II	Blizzard	ST	8.75
	7 Red Alert	Virgin/Westwood	ST	8.74
	8 Heroes II	New World Comp	ST	8.73
	9 Civilization II	MicroProse	ST	8.71
★	10 Diablo	Blizzard	RP	8.70
	11 Steel Panthers Campaign Disk	SSI	WG	8.68
★	12 Links LS	Access	SP	8.66
★	13 You Don't Know Jack II	Berkeley Systems	CP	8.54
	14 Red Alert: Counterstrike	Virgin/Westwood	ST	8.38
	Steel Panthers II	SSI	WG	8.38
	16 Steel Panthers	SSI	WG	8.37
★	17 Wing Commander IV	EA/Origin	SI	8.31
	18 Duke Nukem 3D	3D Realms	AC	8.28
	19 Tomb Raider	Eidos	AC	8.25
	20 Command & Conquer	Virgin/Westwood	ST	8.24
	NASCAR Racing 2	Sierra	SP	8.24
	22 C&C: Covert Operations	Virgin/Westwood	ST	8.23
★	23 Gabriel Knight 2	Sierra	AD	8.21
	You Don't Know Jack	Berkeley Systems	CP	8.21
	25 The Pandora Directive	Access	AD	8.19
	26 Civilization II: Scenarios	MicroProse	ST	8.18
	27 Battleground: Shiloh	TalonSoft	WG	8.13
	28 AH-64 Longbow	EA/Origin	SI	8.12
	Battleground: Bull Run	TalonSoft	WG	8.12
	30 NHL 97	EA Sports	SP	8.10
	31 Crusader: No Remorse	EA/Origin	AC	8.07
	32 Battleground: Napoleon in Russia	TalonSoft	WG	8.06
	MechWarrior 2	Activision	SI	8.06
	34 MechWarrior 2: Mercenaries	Activision	SI	8.04
	35 Quake	id Software	AC	8.02
	Tigers on the Prowl II	HPS	WG	8.02
	37 Grand Prix 2	MicroProse	SP	8.01
	38 Battleground: Antietam	TalonSoft	WG	7.98
	39 The Need for Speed SE	EA	AC	7.97
	40 You Don't Know Jack Movies	Berkeley Systems	CP	7.96
	41 NBA Live 97	EA Sports	SP	7.95
	42 Heroes of Might & Magic	New World Comp	ST	7.87
	Twinsen's Odyssey	Activision	AD	7.87
	44 Dungeon Keeper	EA/Bullfrog	ST	7.86
	45 Silent Hunter	SSI	SI	7.85
	46 U.S. Marine Fighters	EA	SI	7.82
	47 Jack Nicklaus 4	Accolade	SP	7.80
	48 Sega	Sierra	AD	7.79
	49 Crusader: No Regret	EA/Origin	AC	7.75
	Triple play 98	EA Sports	SP	7.75

	GAME	COMPANY	TYPE	SCORE
	51 Battleground: Waterloo	TalonSoft	WG	7.73
	52 You Don't Know Jack Sports	Berkeley Systems	CP	7.72
	53 The Neverhood	DreamWorks	AD	7.69
	54 Moto Racer	EA	AC	7.65
	X-COM 3	MicroProse	ST	7.65
	56 EF2000	Ocean	SI	7.62
	Realms of the Haunting	Interplay	AD	7.62
	58 Jagged Alliance: Deadly Games	Sir-Tech	ST	7.59
	59 NASCAR Racing	Sierra	SP	7.57
	60 Decisive Battles of WWII: Ardennes	SSI/SSG	WG	7.55
	61 Battleground: Gettysburg	TalonSoft	WG	7.54
	MDK	Playmates/Shiny	AC	7.54
	63 U.S. Navy Fighters	EA	SI	7.53
	64 Interstate '76	Activision	AC	7.50
	65 Pacific General	SSI	WG	7.49
	66 NHL Hockey 96	EA Sports	SP	7.47
	Spycraft	Activision	AD	7.47
	Triple play 97	EA Sports	SP	7.47
	69 Circle of Blood	Virgin	AD	7.46
	70 Lords of the Realm II	Sierra	ST	7.43
	71 Advanced Tactical Fighters	EA	SI	7.42
	CivNet	MicroProse	ST	7.42
	Fantasy General	SSI	ST	7.42
	Full Throttle	LucasArts	AD	7.42
	The Need for Speed	EA	AC	7.42
	76 NBA Live 96	EA Sports	SP	7.40
	77 X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter	LucasArts	SI	7.39
	78 Dopefish	Bethesda	RP	7.38
	79 688(I) Hunter/Killer	EA/Jane's	SI	7.37
	FPS Football Pro '96	Sierra	SP	7.37
	81 Robert E. Lee: Civil War General	Sierra	WG	7.34
	82 Comanche 3	NovaLogic	SI	7.32
	Leisure Suit Larry 7	Sierra	AD	7.32
	Power Chess	Sierra	CP	7.32
	85 Extreme Assault	Blue Byte	AC	7.31
	PGA Tour Golf 486	EA Sports	SP	7.31
	PGA Tour Pro	EA Sports	SP	7.31
	88 FPS Football Pro '97	Sierra	SP	7.30
	89 FIFA 97	EA Sports	SP	7.28
	Tony LaRussa 3	Stormfront	SP	7.28
	91 Fleet Express	Broderbund	AD	7.27
	92 Age of Rifles Campaign Disk	SSI	WG	7.26
	93 System Shock	EA	AC	7.23
	94 Incredible Toons	Sierra	CP	7.21
	95 Lighthouse	Sierra	AD	7.20
	Magic the Gathering	MicroProse	ST	7.20
	97 Privateer: the Darkening	Origin	SI	7.17
	98 Descent II	Interplay	AC	7.16
	Theme Hospital	EA/Bullfrog	ST	7.16
	Virtual Pool	Interplay	SP	7.16

Games on unnumbered lines are tied with game on line above. ★ = Top game of type. Red = New Game. AD = Adventure, RP = Role-Playing, SI = Simulation/Space Combat, ST = Strategy, WG = Wargame, AC = Action, SP = Sports, CP = Classic/Puzzle. Games are retired after two years and become eligible for the Hall of Fame.

What's the Deal With...the Wrong Lessons?



We're reveling in the traditional fall quarter frenzy as I write this, with title after title vying to be the hot new thing, or, more accurately, trying to successfully clone what made last year's hit the hot thing it was. While it's useless to bemoan the lack of originality in computer games (or movies, books, or cars) in this demographically driven society, what never ceases to amaze me is the utter inability of some portions of the industry to buy a clue, even when the truth is staring them in the face.

Just look at the DOOM bandwagon-jumping. I mean, DOOM was huge for pretty much two reasons: multiplayer capability and creepy game environments. Now, it's pretty safe to say that the industry has gotten the message about network and Internet capability—even LucasArts has added it to JEDI KNIGHT (though by ignoring co-op multiplay they stubbornly refuse to complete the picture). But the real genius of DOOM was shown in its moody atmosphere (who can forget their first sight of those four demon lords staked to the walls? You just knew some serious bad mojo was about to go down...), its coherent sound (the heavy breathing of monsters just on the other side of the door), and its truly chaotic battlefields (with foes that would go blood-crazy and kill everything in their path). But what's really laughable is that executives, and even some designers, looked at that genius and the lesson they learned was "Duh...gamers want more blood and more Satan."

The result is no surprise: a horde of forgettable games that did little except generate some really stupid ads. If it weren't for games such as HEXEN, which tried to improve upon the game environment, I would have sworn that the letters D-O-O-M created some sort of lobotomizing neurological feedback in anybody high up enough in a game company to make design calls.

The wackiness doesn't end there. What lesson did the industry get from TOMB RAIDER? "Gamers wanna see big, 3D breasts!"

> **"What lesson did the industry get from TOMB RAIDER? 'Gamers wanna see big, 3D breasts!'"**

Another great "wrong answer" making its way through the industry is that the huge sales numbers for console games have nothing to do with the fact that the game systems cost less than $200. Instead, the powers that be have decided that it must be because cartridge games are pretty and simple...that must be what gamers want! They assume that if they have a computer game that is indistinguishable from a cartridge game, and does away with all that annoying potential a keyboard can give you, it will sell the same number of copies as the cartridge game. Of course, it doesn't occur to any of them that when you have just spent $3,000 on a rig, you are looking for something a little more in-depth than jumping for coins. (Those of us who actually paid money for ULTIMA VIII, feel free to mutter bitterly at this point.)

This whole "PC gamers crave simplicity" delusion is staging a strong battle on the real-time front as well. I cannot believe that the guys at SSI (who gave the okay for DARK COLONY) could have come away from COMMAND & CONQUER thinking, "That's it! The key to real-time wargaming is a limited number of units, no-brainer base building, and some really incoherent and violent animated cut-scenes!" Nobody says your designs have to embody originality every time a new one hits the page, but for the love of Xerox, at least try to clone the good parts. I can only pray that somebody out there is busy right now picking out the best aspects of DARK REIGN, TOTAL ANNIHILATION and the whole research/design engine from WAR INC. Unfortunately, I suspect that, instead, somebody in a sharp suit is showing a screenshot from CONQUEST EARTH to a roomful of horrified programmers while saying, "This is the direction we need to go on this project."

And of course, there isn't even a point in going into all the wrong answers that game companies brought away from the whole MYST experience.

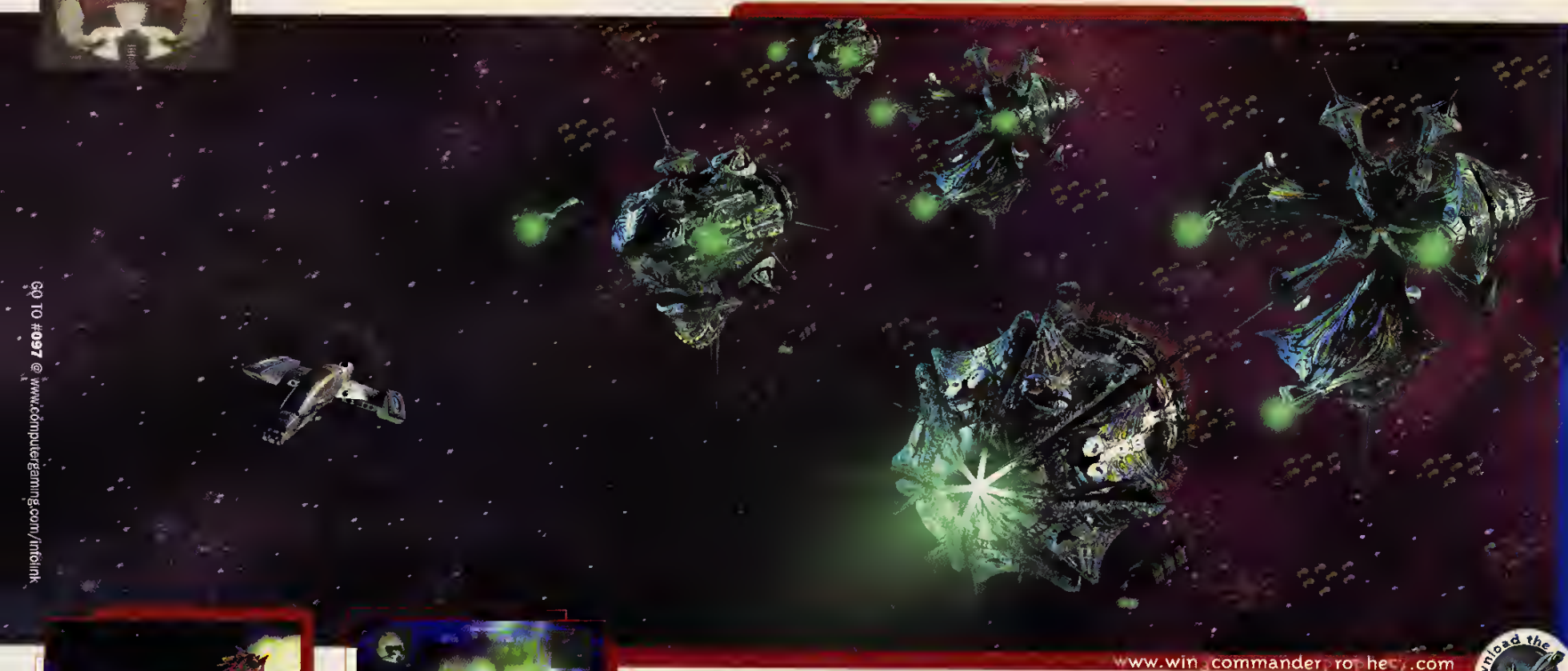
Are salaries paid in inverse proportion to competency in this industry? Maybe it's our fault. C'mon, own up to it out there! Are you secretly turning in feedback cards, written in crayon, that say "Orgo not like game...make brain hurt with complexity and my guy not punch out spleens"? After all, there has to be some reason that companies keep learning the wrong lessons from the right games.

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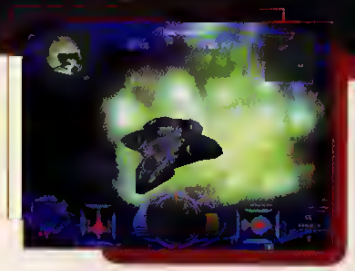
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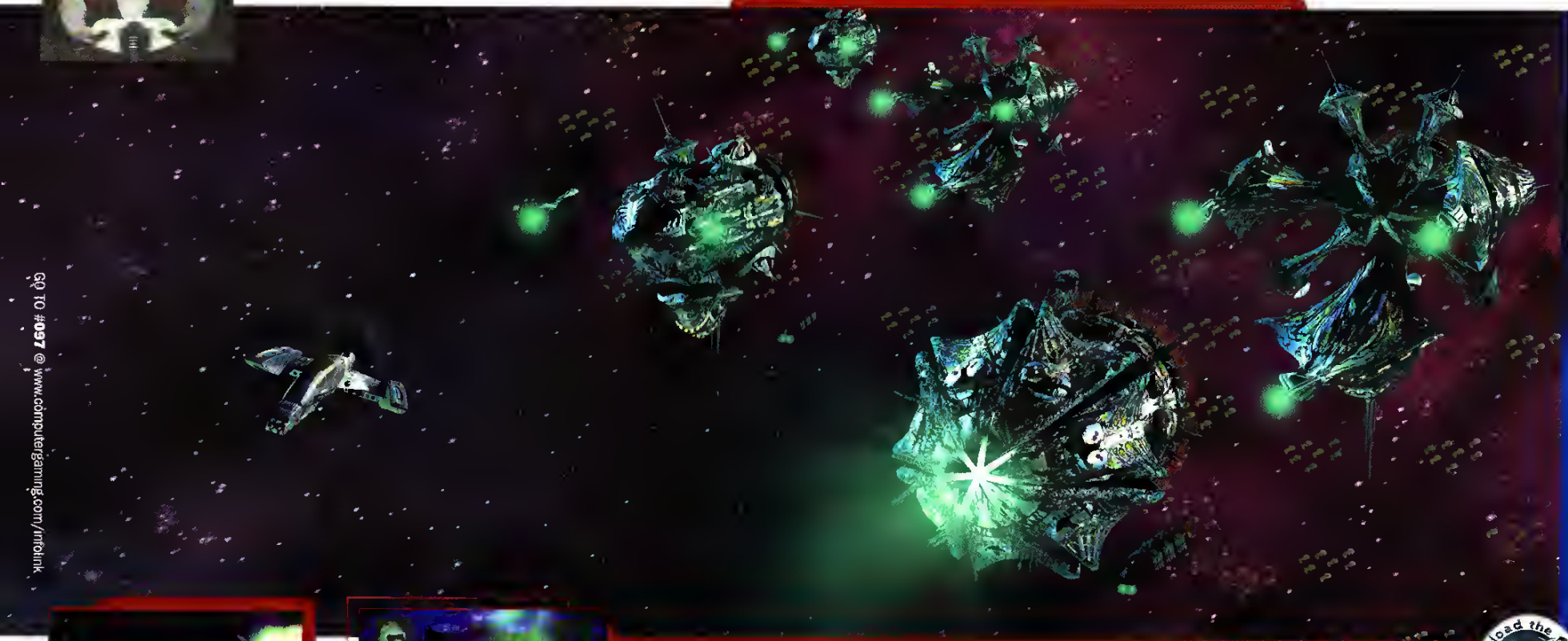
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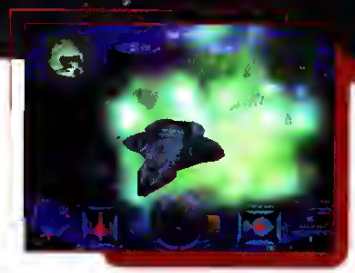


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